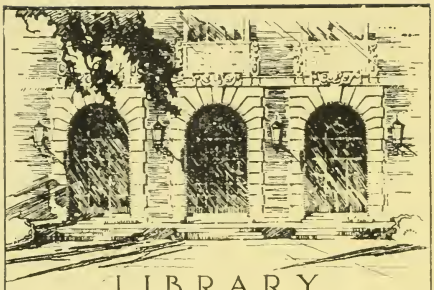

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Guynne Holford

MR. AND MRS. ASHETON.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

"MARGARET AND HER BRIDESMAIDS,"

"THE LADY OF GLYNNE, &c.

"Be satisfied;
Something thou hast to bear through womanhood—
Peculiar suffering answering to the sin;
Some pang paid down for each new human life;
Some weariness in guarding such a life—
Some coldness from the guarded; some mistrust
From those thou hast too well served; from those beloved
Too loyally, some treason; feebleness
Within thy heart, and cruelty without;
And pressures of an alien tyranny,
With its dynastic reasons of larger bones
And stronger sinews. But go to!—thy love
Shall chant itself its own beatitudes,
After its own life-working. A child's kiss
Set on thy sighing lips, shall make thee glad;
A poor man served by thee, shall make thee rich;
An old man helped by thee, shall make thee strong.
Thou shalt be served thyself, by every sense
Of service which thou renderest."—*E. B. Barrett.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
SUCCESSORS TO HENRY COLBURN,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1860.

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LONDON:
PRINTED BY R. BORN, GLOUCESTER STREET,
REGENT'S PARK.

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MR. AND MRS. ASHETON.

CHAPTER I.

RUMOUR AGAIN BUSIES HERSELF ABOUT MRS. ASHETON'S AFFAIRS.

AGAIN rumour rioted unrestrained on the state of affairs at Asheton Court, and again *Nos.* 1 and 2, the banker's wife and the rector's female curate, had the privilege of spreading, or rather creating, the basis of the reports—the mysterious hints of the Lady Superior (or Miss Walker, as Prissy contended she ought to be called, that having been her father's name), which were all the more pungent from their ill-nature (superior as she was, she

was yet amenable to the vexation of a disappointment irritating her temper). Joined to her remarks were others still less truthful, yet even more powerful, uttered by Beatrice. Coming from one of her own relations, who had the right to question the authority? But above all, was the ocular demonstration of the poor mourner, daily seated on the sands, listless, forlorn, unheeding—the servants so respectfully vigilant, Prissy so determinately watchful.

The great Asheton mystery was now explained. Poor Mr. Asheton was very much pitied, at the same time considered to be rightly served. He married in a hurry, without consulting anyone, gladly as everyone would have come forward to advise him. He probably knew nothing about the young lady, consequently he must reap the fruits of neglecting to marry into one of the county families, whose antecedents were well known, patent to all the world.

It was sad to think one so young, so pretty,

with so much promise of good in her countenance, should be cursed with insanity. But this direful calamity generally seized upon the young and lovely, those with ever varying expressions and transparent eyes.

Mr. Asheton was now excused from the sin of deserting his wife; it was necessary for the children's welfare that they should be removed from their mother's society. Old Mrs. Asheton had been left in charge, and while she lived the secret was well kept. But now it could be concealed no longer; young Mrs. Asheton wandered forth deranged, but harmless.

These opinions being decided, the fact of insanity established, all interest vanished in the disclosure. The county had other and more important affairs to discuss, and once more Ashetons and their concerns became a dead letter.

"We have had a great many visitors lately at the Court," wrote Prissy to Sir Robert Fane, "but May did not see anyone; except-

ing one, and that was the Duchess. I don't mind entertaining common people, and receiving them for May, but I am not used to duchesses, so I just said to her, 'Would you like to see my cousin?' and she seemed quite delighted, and so we took May by surprise, though, of course, nothing surprises her now.

"And the duchess staid quite an hour, and was very pleasant—indeed she almost cried once, which, you know, being a duchess, I did not think she would have done, except that I suppose they feel just as much as we do.

"She was telling May how well she remembered her first appearance, having heard before a very strange report about her, and how she took a fancy to her then, and had remembered her ever since. And she must pardon her for lamenting over the change, or something of that sort.

"'You have no mother, I think,' she said, so kindly, 'I should like to be your mother, if I might.'

"Then May looked up pleased, but she only took hold of her hand.

"'You have some sorrow, my love,' said the duchess.

"'Yes; but it cannot be mended.'

"'God does not permit us such hopeless feelings.'

"'Mine are hopeless. I know of nothing that can remove them.'

"Then it was the tears came into the duchess's eyes, and she said:—

"'Have you none to care for, or love you?"'

Here we shall have to leave Prissy's letter, and record a strange and rather bewildering exclamation that burst from her at this interesting stage of the conversation between Marion and her visitor.

"My goodness, gracious me! what a goose I have been all this time. To think of me never remembering such a thing."

But as Marion did not heed it, the duchess took no notice. But it must not be passed un-

regarded by the reader, because it led to consequences.

No sooner was Prissy released from her duties at Asheton Court, than she ran to the Woodhead, puffing and panting like a dilapidated or deeply-injured pair of bellows,—down she sat, flushed and ardent, to write a letter. Fast and furious went the pen, dashed and scored was every other word, sealed and blotched was the letter, vehement and strong were Prissy's injunctions regarding its speedy and safe delivery by the postman.

Then, as he went out of sight, important bearer of this most important dispatch, swinging his arm (for he had but one), as if arms were only used to swing, and he felt no inconvenience from not having as many as other people, he became invested in Prissy's eyes with a strange fascination. As his form appeared and disappeared through the trees, Prissy's face altered from alternate indignation at his slowness to high satisfaction at his reappearance.

Conjectures as to a probable fall, entailing the breaking of a leg, were satisfactorily answered by his jumping into sight with great agility; and until a turn of the road shut him fairly out of view, Prissy's interest in him grew with every step. Failing further conjectures regarding him, she fell to various mysterious remarks anent her letter.

"I have written a letter, and I have sent a letter; I wonder if I shall have an answer to that letter."

At the Wooodhead everybody was so busy about his own affairs, no one heeded other peoples'. So Prissy hinted on obscurely and enigmatically, unregarded, until time altered the phase of her speech.

"I have written a letter, and I have sent a letter, and I have never had an answer yet."

Eight days passed. From the first state of excitement, Prissy had passed into a lofty mood, then into one of perplexity. Finally, she became low and desponding. The postman, with only one arm, was an object

neither of interest nor pity. He was simply a tiresome man, always coming when Prissy was in the middle of a frill.

On the ninth day, she could no longer say:—

"I have never had an answer."

There lay a letter, in an unknown hand-writing; clearly "the answer."

CHAPTER II.

PRISSY PREPARES FOR COMPANY.

It is recorded that Prissy was too dumbfounded at first to open her letter. She looked upon it as a ghost. Gradually her nerves strengthened, she broke the seal, the stocking that she was knitting fell unheeded on the floor, and the kitten took immediate possession of it, as if it was a plaything meant for her. And Prissy never regarded the mischief the kitten did that day, any more than if she had indeed intended her stocking to have no better fate.

Not having ever seen Prissy's letter, we cannot give it, but the answer is before us.

This is the copy, with Prissy's commentaries as she read :—

"My dear Cousin,

"(Well, I am glad of that, at any rate, because I am her cousin, whether or no). I thank you very much for your kind and feeling letter (so I suppose she does love May). On the evening of the same day you receive this, we shall be at the Woodhead (law!), and I shall leave it to you to prepare my darling Marion (goodness), or not, as you think best. (Now, that's what I call—just that, you know.) When I see you, dear Prissy, I will make you ask forgiveness for doubting my love and interest. Whatever you might have thought, it is evermore yours, in gratitude for telling me of May's state. We shall bring but one servant—a man.

"Your affectionate cousin,

"Kythe Gordon."

"So that is an answer, and a very proper one.

"I forget what sort of letter I wrote, 'kind and feeling.'" (Prissy thinks it was a model of a letter to this day, though it was written in a lofty, disdainful style, as we know, good reader.) "Mamma, I have got a letter; it is from my cousin, Lady Gordon. She is to be here this evening, with Sir Alan Gordon, her husband, and one servant—a man."

Prissy's announcement was electrical. Good Mrs. Flower cried with joy. Mr. Flower spoke. He absolutely said, "I am glad of it." Beatrice shuddered and trembled. Lady Gordon had ever held a species of awe over her. Prissy alone held high ground.

"We must prepare the best room."

"To be sure, to be sure, my dear," answered Mrs. Flower. "Take my best *barège* out of the wardrobe, Prissy, and you'll find two or three of my caps somewhere. And I put the cat there, with her kittens, in the clothes' basket, because she eats them if she is looked at or disturbed. And your

father's surplice is pinned within the curtains, to keep it from the dust. And, oh! Prissy, Prissy, I think the last lot of preserves is put there, until I can brandy and tie them down. What ought we to have for dinner? Scotch dishes? Well, how delightful. She is a beautiful woman, I hear, and he a very fine man. Constant, what sermon have you got ready?"

But as Mrs. Flower never ceased speaking, we will refrain recording further.

After all was prepared, and the bustle of preparation was over, Prissy had time to think. It had been settled Marion was not to be told. The surprise, it was hoped, would be beneficial to her, rather than the contrary.

"Goodness, gracious me, I wonder what she is like! If she is a great lady, she will not like any of us but Beatrice, and she will not do May good, and I shall be blamed. I begin to wish I had never written that letter. She may turn out very disagreeable, and most likely too, never having come to see May all

these years ; or her husband may be still more disagreeable. However, it's no use worrying. I do declare I think that's the carriage. Oh, law ! now I wish I was a hundred miles away. I'll never write any more letters, I am certain."

Ere five minutes had elapsed, Prissy had recanted that last resolve a thousand times over.

A beautiful and stately likeness of the lovely Marion was looking at Prissy with affectionate eyes, and kissing her with grateful kisses. Only the dear May had not so regal a presence, such soft dark eyes, the shining dark hair, smoothed as with an unerring painter's hand, across the broad, intellectual forehead ; a voice of such low soft melody. Beatrice looked faded and small beside her—the remembrance of Marion brought only girlish prettiness to mind. Like the presence of some beautiful and grand exotic among the wild flowers of the hedgerows, sat Kythe, Lady Gordon, in the midst of them.

"Goodness me, she is my cousin, and not once removed. I don't know what to liken her to. Perhaps an angel, but I never saw one. Archangels are men, I believe, and not women. A queen is much too common; an empress would be better. And yet that won't do, because she is more kind than grand, and, oh, how she loves Sir Alan! And how handsome he is, though so melancholy; and what a cough he has—how it startled me! I thought it came out of the cellar. And she is not fine, she never brought a maid, and has unpacked, and put away everything. But what an odd servant; as for understanding his foreign language, it's no use trying; I had no idea Scotch people had a different language to us. What a hideous man he is; but I suppose he is a good servant, for my cousin Kythe (she told me to call her Kythe, or I never could have done it) seemed to regard him so much, and was so anxious about him, the great monster; he might have a dozen colds, before I would trouble my head about him. Oh, my

stars, don't I wish those Ashetons could have seen my cousin, Lady Gordon—but I must to bed; I and my cousin are to be off to the Court before breakfast to-morrow."

The above are faint shadowings of Prissy's thoughts that evening, after she had retired to her room.

May was sitting in the summer parlour, waiting for Edward; their breakfast, consisting of two wooden bowls of milk, richly covered with cream, a loaf of brown bread, water-cresses and salt, was placed ready upon a small table in one window, while she looked out of the other into the flower-garden. She was too listless even to turn her head as the door opened, though she said:—

"You are punctual, dear boy—a good mark to-day."

"Oh, indeed!" answered Prissy, blunderingly nervous as to what had best be done."

Marion turned and saw them — one look was sufficient.

"Oh, sister, sister, love your poor forsaken Marion!"

And the long pent-up grief burst forth as she precipitated herself into her sister's arms.

Satisfied that she had done a good deed, and convinced that the new cousin required no assistance to subdue all violent emotion, Prissy pounced upon Edward's bowl of milk, which, with the brown loaf, she bore off, discreetly closing all communication between the world and the long separated sisters.

"Now, Edward, you need not go downstairs, but take your breakfast here—and then you shall say your lessons to me."

"Aunt May is not ill?"

"No."

"Or unhappy?"

"No, indeed; her sister is come."

"You may hear me my lessons, if you like, Prissy, but all the sisters in the world won't prevent Aunt May hearing them too."

"Oh, you conceited boy, why, she has

not seen this sister, her only sister, for eight or ten years."

"Still, she will hear my lessons; but what is this sister like?"

"Oh, so beautiful, such a magnificent woman; I am half afraid of her, and I know Beatrice is too, which is extraordinary."

"Then I shall not care for her. I don't like big women."

"You very saucy boy!"

"Now, Prissy, have you never seen that the little bantam cocks and hens in the farmyard are always the quickest, the most spirited and lively, while those great, overgrown Dorking hens think of nothing but grubbing and laying eggs. Great things are generally stupid, so I shall not admire your grand beauty."

"You are much too young to know anything about beauty."

"And pray what more do you know of it?"

"I am a very good judge, though I am not a beauty myself, but I wish I was; I should

like to be admired and praised very much. What a nice thing it would be!"

Edward, being at that age when boys are prone to blurt out the exact truth, and a little more, the reverse of complimentary, had no answer to give to Prissy's confidences. Moreover, he was thinking of his own private grievances. Never before had anyone presumed to engross his Aunt May at this unwonted hour in the morning, and he began to suffer from jealousy.

He finished his breakfast in silence, and was about to obey Prissy's behest, and repeat his lessons to her, when he heard a well-known voice calling him.

With a shout of delight hurled at Prissy's head, which made her shudder, he rushed downstairs. He was right, he did say his lessons to his Aunt May, though not then, and he accepted a kiss from Lady Gordon with extreme graciousness, ere he went for his ride.

CHAPTER III.

TWO SISTERS COMPARE SORROWS.

Sir Alan and Lady Gordon would remain neither at the Woodhead nor at Asheton Court. They took a small house to themselves on the beach.

For a time, Marion revived under the influence of her sister's presence.

"So should I, if I was dying," remarked Prissy to anyone who might be within hearing.

Very gentle were both her sister and brother to Marion, but she drooped again.

The sisters sat together on that favourite seat. Sir Alan was riding with Edward.

"Are your sorrows never to end? Have you no hope, my May,"

"None, sister;—all my life long, I shall have to bear this solitary existence, which is yet peopled with memories and thoughts that make it even more desolate. Then my children will grow up into men and women—they will begin their battle of life, and there will be no mother's heart to watch over their first griefs, to guide them to their first joys. Think, sister, my children might pass me, and not recognise their mother."

"I hear so high a character of Mr. Asheton, Marion, for honour and justness, for everything but this one mistaken whim regarding his children. Rely upon it, love, he will return, he will restore them."

"No, he loves them, but not their mother. He wished for heirs, for children to perpetuate the name he loves so well. He has them. Henceforward, their mother is nothing to him or them."

"This is too monstrous for me to believe,

my May. Some evil influence has been at work. The very love he has for the children must increase his love for their mother."

"He loves them too much, too well—and all the more because they are Ashetons. There has been no other evil influence at work than that single one of family pride. I had a fear, a strange interest, when I perceived the magnitude of this besetting sin. But I guessed not that it would outrage the holiest feelings, leaving half my heart dead, because the love of him emptied it, and the other half wounded, crushed, crying for those to whom I gave life. Oh, my sister, it is impossible; I cannot live, and bear so much woe. I would to God I were dead."

Laying her head on her sister's lap in utter abandonment of woe, she scarcely felt the caressing fingers of Kythe smoothing her disordered hair, or knew that her hot tears fell as fast as her own.

"My Alan intends, dearest, to write to Mr. Asheton, as your nearest male relative—"

"Not for worlds—it must not be. I sorrow only on my own account. I know my children are well cared for. I can be, I am, to the full as proud as he. Some day, I may be revenged, but I will not enforce it. No, no, Kythe, sister, dearest, promise that no appeal is made to Mr. Asheton on my behalf. I do not doubt his love and care for the children. He must not have the power to say—I could not live without him. I am a mother, and have no children—it is for that I mourn."

"Some mothers are more to be pitied than you, Marion—they have wicked children."

"But perhaps their children live with them, and as they sin, so can their loving hearts try means to correct them—or pray to God for them—ever and ever more, as they require it."

"Some mothers have unsightly, deformed, or ailing children."

"Ah! sister, then are they happy; no one would wish to take them from their mother."

"Dearest Marion, what a loving heart you

have. Let me try some other plea. Let me tell you of misfortunes still greater than yours."

"Surely there can be none such. Am I not wounded by the hand I most loved? Am I not deprived of those whom I loved the more because they were his, by the deliberate decision of a heart that ought to have been more mine than theirs."

"Still I think I know of a fate harder to bear."

"I'll not believe it. Nevertheless tell me of this paragon of woes, this phenomenon of grief. Let me mate her sorrows with mine. You shall be judge between us, sister."

"I cannot be judge, Marion, for I am she."

Marion rose, and confronted her sister. Over her face flitted alternately astonishment, remorse, and that speechless pitying love that tells so much, so silently.

"Nay, dearest May, upbraid not yourself, as I see you are about to do. It is through no fault of yours that you have not long since

been my sweetest comforter. I have need of one now, Marion, even as you have. Will you accept the office ?"

"Pardon me, oh, pardon me, my sister, that, in my own selfish woes, I forgot yours of such long standing. Speak, I listen ; as I listen, I make your griefs my own."

"Thanks, love. God is very good to us in granting a time for mutual help and comfort between two sisters whose lives have been so separated. You could not have assisted me before, May, and had you been engrossed with many ties, you could not have done so now."

"Then I thank God, yes, I thank God. Once more I look upon life as a boon, I have work to do ; God help me to comfort you."

Kythe might well be pardoned if she thought she had never seen anything half so lovely as her sister's countenance when she uttered these words. Glowing with renewed hope and love, the earnestness with which she spoke justified the elder sister's involuntary exclamation :—

"Oh, Marion, what a heart you have!"

Marion unheeded these words, she was wrapt up in some fervent prayer, some urgent petition to the Almighty. As if an immediate answer were vouchsafed to her, with unclouded eyes, with a serene composure, very different from that of the listless, pining murmurer so lately bewailing over God's chastisements, Marion knelt before her sister, and kissing her hands, said:—

"Speak, I am yours—yours only, while you require me."

And something of the fervour that flushed Marion's countenance, imparted a glow to her sister's, as she silently, but none the less expressively, returned her kisses.

"Our parents regard us," whispered Marion, as she perceived her sister struggling for composure.

"I feel that it may be so," whispered Kythe, whose colour came and went, and whose form had sunk back in the attitude of woe more common to Marion. But as her

quick ear caught the sound of the coming horses' feet, she assumed at once her usual air of calm composure, and rose with alacrity to welcome her husband and Edward as they cantered up.

"When do you return home, Kythe?" he asked. "Have we time to go round those rocks? Edward says there are curious caverns there."

"Yes," answered Marion hurriedly; "and I will take my sister up there to what we call the rock seat; from thence we can look down upon you. Do not hurry," she added, as they bid them farewell.

"Where is Kirke?" asked Kythe, when they were out of hearing.

"I think he is there, sister—on the cliff."

"I must tell him, I must speak to him, and then, Marion, then you shall hear all."

"Sister, may I tell you how strange I think it that you have only that uncouth servant, and that you appear to want him every moment?"

A pallid look and strange fear passed over Kythe's face as Marion made this remark, and she hurriedly glanced round, as she said, "Hush."

Marion said no more, though she wondered still further; more especially as the appearance of the old servant, as he came to meet his lady, appeared even more singular than usual. Gaunt and tall, his huge limbs hung loose and awkwardly from their supports, as if they had never been intended for the frame to which they were attached. He might be about sixty years old, and his high cheek-bones and prominent nose were tinged by the sun and weather into a permanent brick colour. His eyes were small, keen, and blue in colour, as bright as those of youth; his hair had been red; and as he shambled towards them with great splay feet, Marion thought she had never beheld so unprepossessing a figure.

"What's gotten him the noo, my leddy?" was his greeting to Lady Gordon.

"You said, May, we could see them from the cliffs," asked Kythe. "They are gone to see some caverns round the Point, Kirke."

"Aiblins, I'll see them caverns mysel', my leddy; it's joost best."

"If you think so, Kirke, then go, and keep them out as long as you can. I have much to say to my sister."

"Ay, ay, its time ye telled her a'; she'll maybe's have dune fretten, when she hears of warsen woes."

And ere Marion could express her astonishment, and perhaps indignation, he had shambled away, at vast speed, and her sister was already urging her to hasten to the rock seat.

CHAPTER IV.

THE HISTORY OF KYTHE.

"Do you like Alan, my husband?" asked Kythe, after they were seated.

"I have thought only of you and my grief, since you came, sister. I think, as a girl, I was afraid of him; but he is very kind and gentle to me now."

"Marion, Alan is possessed of every virtue with which God can bless the human heart; linked to as few of the vices that belong to our weak frames as you can imagine. Yet have I cried in my agony, 'Would to God I had never seen him!' But I must not anticipate. It is necessary that I go back. You

will not tire, love, if I tell you somewhat of my earliest years."

Marion's only answer was to fling herself, with childish impetuosity, on the sward before her sister, and crossing her arms on that sister's knee, she supported her face upon them, looking up with as much eagerness as love.

"My first grief was the separation from our sweet mother; and though I had a most loving home with our grandmother Aubrey, from whom, May, you get your blue eyes and fair hair, nothing ever effaced the remembrance of the first one. The hope of returning to it spurred me on to every duty, every exertion. I feared to lose the blessing of God, and be debarred this happiness, as a fit punishment. Therefore, even as a mere girl, I early learnt self-control, and as if chastisement for my first principle not having a higher origin, I never saw again the parents for whom I pined; yet, Marion, this early discipline prepared me for my present life.

"You may have heard that from my godmother, Kythe Gordon, I acquired a separate fortune from the rest of the family, consisting of 1,500*l.* a year. She was our grandmother's greatest friend. Among other of my girlish wishes, was the desire to restore this fortune to the proper heirs. I liked not being enriched to the detriment of more rightful parties, and to me there was something displeasing in being moved above the care and charge of my parents. It seemed to sever some sacred ties between us. But I could do nothing until I had consulted them, and had reached the proper age. The happy period fixed for my return to you all arrived. I was seventeen years old. I was only waiting a safe escort, when, as I dare say you have heard, our grandmother fell into that long illness, for which our parents were coming home, when honour permitted our father and grandfather to sell out.

"My May will believe, she will judge me by her own affectionate heart, that she who had been mother, father, all to me, was not

to be left, when she most required care, to the attendance of servants only. I wrote to ask permission to stay with our grandmother, though indeed, May, it was with the heaviest heart I did it, and was rewarded by the blessing and thanks of my parents for my decision.

"Our grandmother was completely bed-ridden, and the long evenings were spent by me almost in solitude. One evening, after I had left her for the night (she would never permit me to sleep in her room), it might be about eight o'clock, I felt very desolate and low, and my thoughts wandered to India, mourning over the fate that separated me so far from those I loved as you loved, May. I had heard no sound of bells or doors shutting, when before me I saw, endeavouring to address me, a young gentleman whose appearance gave me an instant and sudden throb of pleasure.

"You see my Alan now, May; you can also remember how much time has changed him since you first saw him, nine years ago."

"Yes, I did not, I should not have known him."

"Then you will not think me passing all bounds of the most immoderate affection, when I tell you it is impossible to have seen more than once in a lifetime so beautiful a specimen of youthful manhood as my Alan presented at one and twenty, and the melancholy charm of his manner suited peculiarly a nature like mine, whose whole heart was so drawn in opposite directions.

"He was not only very much embarrassed as he addressed me, but he turned red and pale so often, I could not but fear he was ill. I understood from him that he thought I had rejoined my parents in India, and that, in obedience to the dying wishes of his aunt and my grandmother, Kythe Gordon, he had come to visit Mrs. Aubrey in her loneliness. This made me tell him of my determination to restore her fortune to her rightful heirs, and I hoped he would assist me to find out those who most

needed it. He smiled—oh, May, what power there is in a smile—"

"Hush, hush," exclaimed May, shuddering, "I know it."

"My darling," whispered the fond elder sister, caressing her. Then aloud, she continued:—

"I discovered, May, that he alone was left of the whole of his family, and immediately I penetrated the cause of his sadness, and pitied him as quickly; I felt I should like to be his sister and comfort him, and something of this kind I must have expressed, as having been the almost adopted child of his aunt, and thus somewhat entitled to be considered a connexion."

"'No,' he said, 'that could not be; indeed it was his aunt who had warned him against any intercourse with Miss Flower.'

"'And wherefore?' I asked, hurt and amazed.

"He again smiled, saying:—

"'It was for his own sake she had thus

warned him, but as accident had introduced us to each other, he should regard his aunt's scruples no longer, but would call again in the morning, at an hour when he could see Mrs. Aubrey.'

"It is the privilege of youth, May, to gild their thoughts with all bright and happy things. After this evening, I know not what possessed me, some essence of divine ether ran through my veins, giving a lightness and elasticity to my frame, that was only equalled by the happiness of my heart; I liked to think that I would restore my godmother's fortune to one so thoroughly worthy of it. I wondered if he was rich, and would not care for it; I hoped he was poor, was in love, and could not marry without more fortune. What happiness to restore his own to him!

"I must not dwell on this time; if I do, how shall I describe the end?—what must be the end? He came very often, always now, when our grandmother was wheeled into the drawing-room. If he chanced to find me

alone, he left immediately. May, I knew, I felt he liked me, and this fitting regard for my youth and inexperience made me less careful to scrutinize my life. I liked it only too well. By degrees, at my grandmother's wish, I went out a little into the world, chaperoned by her old friends. I was presented; the name of Flower being then in all people's mouths, our father and grandfather were gaining us a fine, a grand notoriety. You will guess, May, I was more proud to say that I was their child, than any admiration that fell to my own share."

"I remember your letters then, Kythe. I heard my mother say to our father, after reading a letter from England, 'How beautiful our girl must be, Osman, though she says nothing herself of the admiration she excites. Only of her heroes does she write.' I ran to the glass to see also if I was pretty, and I thought that I too would think more of being our brave father's daughter, than of any other gift."

"I met Alan often; long before I looked up and around for him in those crowded companies, I knew he would have seen and recognised me. I began to know he loved me, and in that knowledge came so large a flood of contentment and peace into my heart, that I had no thoughts, no wishes, nothing but the desire that time might last for ever thus. We young girls, when first we give up our hearts, think less of ourselves, Marion, than of the object we love. I could have borne to see Alan married to anyone who would make him happy, and chase from his eyes that look of profound melancholy which melted me day by day. I studied the characters of the different girls whom I met in society, with the intention of discovering one deserving of his love, and I felt (so unselfish, so fearless is true love) that when I did do so, I would point out her attractions, speak of her, love her, court her myself for him, and take that happy place of sister as I first desired; but though I discovered more than one, amiable, beautiful,

all he could wish, my endeavours proved fruitless.

"'Ah, grandmamma,' I exclaimed one day to her, 'I wish you would assist me,' and I told her all my thoughts, and the affection I had for him, and how I wished to prove it.

"'My love, your efforts are useless; Sir Alan never intends to marry.'

"'Wherefore not, grandmamma? No one seems to me more suited for a domestic life; I am convinced he would suffer no longer from that depression of loneliness, if he had a happy sweet wife to make up to him for the want of all other ties.'

"'My child, he cannot marry; his father forbade him in his will.'

"'Oh,' said I, 'what a daring iniquity is that which prompts a man leaving this world, conscious that he has done with it for ever, neither duty nor tie binding him more, to leave another shackled with his whims, burdened with a command which gathers a growing

chain of galling weight, and he unable to return from the grave to free him.'

"My grandmother sought to stay my words; he was there, May, he had heard me. But I did not blush or fear; my interest in him was too great, too pure.

"He looked so eager, so intensely anxious, that, with a half apology for thus meddling in his affairs, I hurriedly said:—

"'I was telling my grandmother of the numerous pretty girls we met last night, and how I wished you knew Miss Grey better.'

"I stammered; indeed, May, for a moment I was aghast at my own forwardness.

"'Your grandmother knows, if you do not, that few girls can bear a contrast to yourself. If I have appeared callous or indifferent to all I have seen, believe me, I am not singular in regarding no one when you are by.'

"Tears of mortification filled my eyes. The love in my heart for him was not to be sanctified by sacrifice.

"'Kythe,' he said (how is it that some voices exercise such an influence over the heart, and that I listened to his, as the charmed snake listens to the soft flute, becoming motionless, pulseless, rather than lose a note?), 'Kythe, my father was a just man. He left that command for my own good; and, until I saw you, I murmured not. Before your grandmother, I tell you, that she may encourage me to fulfil my father's wishes, I love you, oh! how I love you, Kythe. Cease to point out to me the merits, the beauties of others. Though I cannot marry you, I may love and worship you, as I do now—now.' May, did you love your husband?"

Cold as an icy blast came a shivering tremor through Marion's frame.

"Dearest, you know what love is, the love of a wife for her husband."

"Yes," whispered Marion, "it is like the breath we draw, as the life that God gives, the pulse of the heart."

"Then so did I love Alan. If he was not

to marry, neither would I; we would be brother and sister. But our grandmother counselled him to flee (as she termed it) from temptation. If I did wrong, May, I have been rightly punished. I lured him on. Hitherto, I had been girlishly reserved; I now poured forth for him every gift that God had bestowed on me; I laid myself out to delight and gladden him. His adopted sister should be better to him than ten wives. In very guilelessness of heart I did this, Marion, unwotting that what was happiness to me was torture to him. Our grandmother grew weaker—soon she was unable to leave her room. Again and again I besought my brother to come and see me, I was so low about her, and the news from India was so tantalising. And he came, I could see it, with a joy unspeakable—he came, because he could not help it.

"Each day I told my grandmother, each day she looked more grave; then she sent for Alan, bidding me leave him alone with her;

and, in solitude, I whispered to myself hot and angry words, and a new fierce nature came into my soul. I could barely find my own true self in the chaos of passion and vexation that beset me. She was about to urge him again to fly, and if he adopted her advice, if he did go, if I was to see him no more, never hear his voice again—Ah, Marion, ere I had time to tell myself what I would do, his arms were round me. Sanctioned by my grandmother, he was asking me to be his wife. I know not to this day wherefore she changed, unless it was she knew me better than I did myself. She judged that, having once loved, I should prefer any life, would endure any grief, but never love again. I think she must have written some such words to our parents. We were not to consider ourselves really engaged, she said, until their blessing and sanction arrived. It came. In the ecstasy of reading their consent, I heeded no qualifying circumstances, no deprecatory remarks, which also were probably softened in pity to my

grandmother. We might marry. They were all coming home—would be present at the ceremony. Oh, delight most fleeting, but so wonderfully great, that even now, Marion, I thank God for the remembrance of it."

CHAPTER V.

KYTHE'S HISTORY—CONTINUED.

"I WOULD not permit Alan to feel any remorse —I could not understand it. I was happy, blest, all but in one respect. Again was war too threatening to hope that my father would soon be released; and the sickness of heart that was felt all the more strongly because of the previous anticipations, was too much for my feeble grandmother.

"'Child,' said she, one night, 'I shall live to see none of them, and you will be left to await their arrival alone. Little as your engagement to Alan is known, still it will ooze out, and the world will demand for you a pro-

per chaperon until your parents arrive. That is now so uncertain, I know of none upon whom you have the right to claim a protracted wardship. If you will marry Alan, if nothing can induce you to give up the idea, do it at once. I will give your parents ample reason to justify the step, and at least my remaining days, so few, chilled with protracted hope, will be comforted by seeing you happy—by knowing that you are in need of no other guardianship, in case of my death. Whatever may be your fate, Kythe, take your grandmother's blessing. You will do your duty, and if misfortune is to follow an act against which we took, as we thought, especial pains to guard you, at least no one will bear it with more fortitude. You owe it to your own character that your wishes were regarded by me.'

"Marion, you have heard enough to judge that I alone am to blame, if no blessing attended the marriage.

"It took place immediately, in the simplest, most unostentatious manner. We loved each

other so well, we took upon us these new vows with such solemnity, that a crowd, a pageant, a public revelry would have shocked and troubled us both. A mutual friend alone attended us, at the earliest canonical hour, and we took no further recreation than that of waiting most tenderly on our grandmother, besides writing long, happy letters to India.

"Our grandmother lived but one week after our marriage. It was as if she could bear no further burden. Carefully as we read the papers to her, they were too full of war for us to hide anything. The news of our mother, too, was harassing.

"'My children, go to them; go and see your mother, I will burden you no longer.'

"And she did not.

"As Alan read the evening prayers in her room, I saw the aged hands fall, clasped as they were.

"Ere I could whisper one word, there was no more sorrow or care for her. She was hearing for the first time the melody of heaven,

and the voice she had hitherto loved was unnoticed and inaudible.

"How we comforted each other, Alan and I —it was balm in itself to feel we might mourn together. One week before, and how insupportable would have been our grief. But I linger so long on this time, I must hasten.

"After writing to you all, detailing every circumstance, we followed up our grandmother's last desire, by fixing a time for joining you, waiting but the answer to say where it should be; meantime, we would repair to my Alan's Scotch home, where, in anticipation of a long absence, it was necessary that he should arrange his affairs, and leave everything on such a plan that no fears might attend the pleasure we anticipated; our people should be left happy; comfortable arrangements should be settled regarding winter and sickness. A school should be built. Many, many things are to be done, too tedious to detail, but sufficient to keep us daily employed for a few happy months. This was to be our honeymoon.

"We had a Highland welcome. If I traced some compassion, or heard a pitying expression, it fell unheeded. Our home was so beautiful. The air was of that fresh yet soft description that exhilarates the frame, rendering fatigue unknown. The hills, bare and grand, impressed fine thoughts on the soul as you gazed on them, but you know my home. I was not sorry that we were bid to wait your arrival from India. My mother's state justified immediate steps for your return. I prepared to receive you all. Meantime, but one thing appeared strange to me, and that was the constant presence of the old Scotchman, Kirke. He had not greeted me with any warmth or kindliness, though apparently a most favoured and attached servant of the family. His appearance was unprepossessing, his nature as rugged as the bare hills, and knowing nothing, uncouth and rude in his manners, he yet ruled the house, my husband, all of us. Presuming upon his being so unfit for the head servant of the house, I said to Alan:—

"'Why do you not pension off old Kirke? He is not suited for the establishment of a large house.'

"Marion, my husband let fall upon my ear the first harsh sound of anger and dissent at this, what I deemed, most befitting request. Like many a young wife, I was anxious my house should be a model of order; and Kirke, as head servant, was inefficient in every way. But so that my husband was pleased, so that I never should hear again such words in the home that was to be so sacred and holy a place to me, I cared nothing for that unfitness. On the contrary, I set myself resolutely to work, to soften down and gloss over any unpleasantness that might arise from his incapacity. And, God be praised, the kind, good-hearted man understood and assisted me. For, sister, without that rare, curious specimen of the human race, without his love and care, you would have no sister. It was fortunate for me that I gained his affections.

"Well, sister, always dearly loved; you

know it, Marion, though fate has forbidden its expression."

"Yes, Kythe, I feel it."

"Then, sister, we lived the life of Adam and Eve before they lost Paradise. In the beautiful country duties of life, blessing as you blest, we past our time. We ornamented our house, thanking God for placing our lot in such pleasant lines. We improved our cottages, grateful for the thanks our tenants poured on us. We saw with pleasure the good that was arising from our schools—the advantage of our example; and amid all this we still lived, through books, in the busy, whirling, bustling world; we read to improve ourselves and our people, we had money to do so—health, strength, the will."

Kythe paused, while Marion caressed her.

"God was about to add to us another blessing—you know I have five children, Marion."

"Yes, sister," answered Marion, with a deep sigh.

"I was meditating, one day, as to how I

should tell Alan of this new happiness in store for us, when Kirke approached me.

"'My leddy, hoo is it yer no riding with Sir Alan to-day?'

"'I did not feel very well,' I answered.

"He shook his head, and looked at me sorrowfully.

"'I kenned this life wouldna last,' he said at last. 'But excuse me, my leddy, if ye luve him, and hae oney wish to fend off an evil day, dinna tell him the news ye are thinking on, whiles ye can hide it.'

"You may well believe, Marion, I was very angry both at his impertinence and his advice. But he besought me so earnestly to bear with him, pointed out so strongly all his love and devoted acts for the family, besides beseeching me to follow his advice, or I should rue it, that I could do no less than execute all he wished. At least, I thought, it shall be through no fault of mine, that any evil occurs to my Alan, which Kirke seems to insinuate.

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"So nothing occurred, Marion, until I had a box from London, of clothes, fitted for the innocent being who was to add to our happiness. With what delight I viewed the little delicate things, longing to show them to my husband; but, ah! my sister, my Marion, I had forgotten. Pardon me, love, I will pass over this part as quickly as I can; but it is necessary to allude to it, as it contains the thread of my story.

"I was called away while thus engaged, but I purposely left the little things all in full view. 'I may surely now,' I thought, 'let Alan see what happiness is in store for us.'

"He came in shortly after, and I knew would go and seek me in my favourite room. But I refrained from joining him at first, partly that he might recover from what I knew he would now guess was the case, and partly to nerve myself against a perturbation of feeling.

"Soon I heard a violent noise, loud angry tones, and Kirke's voice in expostulation

struck upon my ear. The other voice was familiar, yet I was certain I had never heard such sounds before.

"I descended, half in fear, when I met Kirke, his countenance, his whole manner, that of a person bewildered with some sudden blow. When he saw me, he composed his features, as if by a miracle.

"'Oh! my leddy, dinna gang in there; we hae met in an accident, Sir Alan and me, and thae prətty little braw things hae been speeled, and they a catchen fire and got burnt. I hanna saved one, my leddy, and I humbly beg yer pardon. But dinna ye gang in there the noo. Bide a wee, until Sir Alan has gotten owre his vexation.'

"But I must not weary you with my long story. When I saw my husband, Marion, some sudden and direful change had come over him. So far from speaking to me of the event so interesting to us both, that he now must have known, he hardly uttered a word the whole evening. A gloom and horror

seemed to have come over him, and when I walked across the room, to seat myself near him, to caress and talk to him as usual, he shuddered as his eyes watched me. Then, in a low voice, he said:—

"'Good night, Kythe; I have business to do which will keep me up late, so that I may not see you again.'

"The next morning I heard that both he and Kirke were absent, having gone off in the night, no one knew whither. For a week, Marion, I was left alone in this terrible uncertainty, without a line, without a word. In my heart I began to accuse Kirke as the author of all my uneasiness.

"Fortunately, just as my patience was exhausted, they returned. But never, Marion, from that hour, did I know perfect happiness again. A constraint hung over my husband; sometimes he was merry and lively, but it was not genuine gaiety. At others he seemed restless and moody, and more often than not, he shuddered at my touch.

"At last my time drew near, and Kirke came to me, with tears in his eyes, entreating me to send my Alan away on some pretence.

"'You are barbarous,' I said to Kirke; 'I cannot—I will not.'

"'Oh, my leddy, do. I hae kenned Sir Alan when he was na an hour auld, and his heart is aye that tender, he will hae some fit maybe, when ye are no to the fore.'

"'What folly is this?' I exclaimed. 'I can listen to you no more.'

"'Oh, my leddy, my leddy, be guided by poor Kirke, ax him hisel if he hasna beezeness in Edinbro'. If he says 'ay' quickly, then ye'll ken he thinks it best he gangs; if he doesna, I'll say nae mair.'

"I thought it no harm to try this experiment, and, to my surprise, Alan said quickly, 'Yes, yes; when shall I go?' It was clear he understood for what, Marion. So he went, and but just in time, Kirke with him.

"I bore my trouble alone, with no loving hand to soothe me, but my hired servants. In

the evening, I lay, with my little son beside me, and wept to think no father had kissed and blessed this priceless gift, and for how long it would be so, I knew not.

"On the third day, in answer to the doctor's letter announcing the event, I had a hurried, but most loving, letter from my husband. It was very incoherent, asking no less than three times, 'Has he your eyes, Kythe?' and ending with, 'If he has, I will return to-morrow to bless him.'

"I had lamented that my babe showed no likeness to his father, but this promise made me look upon his presumed likeness to myself as a boon to be prized.

"He returned. Kirke saw the child first, and then, as the nurse told me afterwards, he called his master, and said he might come and look at his babe without fear. Then he kissed and blessed his child, but I was left with an undefined dread at my heart, unable to account for these strange things.

"We now returned to our old life, and in

some degree were happy. Alan grew fond of his boy, and said he was glad to have two pair of dark eyes to kiss. 'As your mother will tire of such things,' he added, 'if I kiss them too often, my boy.' Nevertheless, sometimes he was absent from me for a month together, for no reason that I could discover, Kirke always going with him.

"The weeks and months flew; you were all still absent. I was expecting another child. This time I made no secret of it, and again my husband seemed to have a moody fit. It was curious also, that in again preparing the little things necessary, whatever was exposed to view, or that I left in my work-basket, disappeared—I never saw it again.

"'Do you mean to take my husband away this time?' I asked Kirke.

"'It is so best, my leddy,' he answered.

"But fate ordained otherwise. I was taken ill suddenly; nevertheless, all went on well; of my own accord I banished Alan. His nervousness was greater than my own.

"This little boy was the image of his father; you know what remarkable eyes Alan has, Marion?"

"Yes, sister, I remember they are bright blue in the middle, with a black or brown rim all round the iris."

"This boy had the same.. For three days I did not see my husband. I was told he was ill. On the fourth I was awakened by a frightful scream in the nurse's room, where lay the baby too. A struggle seemed to ensue, with a horrible noise. My fears made me spring from my bed, and wrapping myself up in a long loose dress, I entered the room. Now, Marion, do you not guess — can you not tell my fate?"

"Go on, sister, go on—suspense is dreadful."

"I saw my husband before me, the little babe of four days old in his grasp. The nurse was on the floor, thrown there with violence, as she was bleeding. But Marion, one look was enough, one glance of that face

I loved so well. I saw it all, the whole truth flashed over me, all Kirke's warnings, all he had tried to hide from me—Marion, do you hear?—he is mad,—my Alan, my husband, my beloved, is insane, and I am without hope—irremediably wretched as wife and mother."

Marion crept into her sister's arms, she kissed her hair, her dress, her mournful eyes, she whispered the fondest, most loving things, she prayed God to help her, bless her, love her, while she trembled with horror at her tale.

Kythe continued it at intervals; but it may be summed up in a few words. Insanity was hereditary in the family. But it had a strange freak; none of them with eyes of one colour ever suffered from the fatal malady; and it was so well known that only those who had the light eyes, with the dark rim, became insane, every precaution was taken, so that, if ungovernably mad, they were removed from home; if quietly so, the faithful old servant,

Kirke, was the guardian. Thus it was but little known in the world, and the secret was well kept among themselves.

Sir Alan, notwithstanding his fatal eyes, had shown but very few symptoms of the hereditary madness. His excellent abilities, his charming character, and well-known good qualities, made him universally popular wherever he went. Yet a morbid feeling accompanied him everywhere; he had always the idea before him of going mad. His father and mother dying, and he having no other male relation, their request that the name and family might become extinct was acceded to by him, and as long as he held to it he was happy.

But love for the beautiful Kythe Flower so overmastered every other feeling, that, as we have seen, it ended in their marriage, and until the prospect of a child being born, nothing occurred to rouse the incipient germs of insanity.

But from that time, his attacks became

frequent; and on the occasion of his discovery that his second child had the fatal eyes of the family, it became ungovernable—in a fit of raving madness, he tried to destroy the child, and the sight of his pale, terror-stricken wife at the door, proving to him that he could guard no longer from her the terrible secret that, with Kirke's assistance, he had tried to withhold, made him worse.

Kythe was carried insensible to the bed from which she did not rise for months, but not before she had seen the terrible straight-waistcoat thrown over her frantic husband by the ever-watchful Kirke; and the gibbering mocking face that was dragged from her sight never left her remembrance. The little child was not seriously injured; the nurse was but too glad, for the lady's sake, to keep the matter quiet. Thus nothing transpired.

When Kythe rose from her long illness, she found her husband well, and in his senses.

In some respects, the knowledge that he had now no secret to hide from her was beneficial. She learnt in time, with all the strength of strong love, to understand his state of mind and health, so as to be able to judge when he might be attacked.

At times, of his own accord, he would leave her, and go with the faithful Kirke to a retired cottage, when, the violent fit over, he would return to his Kythe, thanking God that he was permitted this boon.

But Marion ceased to wonder that her sister had sent her from their home to that of her uncle, for no apparent reason but caprice. All was explained.

Filled with love and awe for a character so beautiful, she said:—

"God bless my Kythe, and make me worthy to be her sister."

But Kythe still wept, and wrung her hands.

"Ah! Marion, you have not yet heard all."

"Sister, I have heard enough. I beg of God pardon for all my murmurings, all my

wayward sorrow. You can have no fate more dreadful to tell me."

"Yes, Marion, listen, you sorrowing little mother. You love your children."

"Alas, Kythe, you know that weeping for them has brought me to this state."

"Do you think I love mine?"

"Fondly, devotedly; they must be all you have to comfort you in your unhappy fate."

"Marion, out of my five children, three have those fatal eyes."

"Ah! merciful God! Kythe, what have we done, that two only sisters should be thus afflicted."

"God is merciful; I braved my fate, and must bear it."

"I will share it with you, Kythe; henceforward, you will let me share all things with you."

"No, love; your nature is too tender and loving. Besides, you would be but another source of anxiety to me. Did you hear Kirke's whisper, that you were not to be seen, by my husband, in close conference with me?"

"Wherefore, sister?"

"Because, like all insane persons, he is not only suspicious, but morbidly sensitive as to any one knowing the real truth. Were he to know that I had told you of this awful calamity, he would be seized with an irresistible impulse to kill you, to do anything to you. For months after I knew, at night I was awakened by his whisperings:—'I must kill her; yes, she must die, my Kythe, my wife, by my own hand.' I have heard him rise, Marion, and search the room for some implement wherewith to do it, and knew that if, by the carelessness of a servant, even so much as a pair of scissors were within his reach, my life was at his mercy. And our little children! Think, Marion, tender and loving as he is, they can never be left one moment alone with him.

"Sister, sister, what a cruel fate! Is there to be no end to it—no peace for you?"

"It is hard and cruel for a wife to think that death may release her from a heavy responsibility; and death or permanent insanity

will be his fate, Marion, for see how aged he is for his years, and after every attack, he becomes weaker, and more fading. But even if I am to see God take his poor stricken soul to heaven, where I may think of him as clothed in the garments of righteousness, seated, in his right mind, at his Saviour's feet, still are my cares ended. Have I not three other doomed beings to rear, only for madness; three pretty loving children, for whom I cannot pray as for the others, knowing that the health and strength I would ask for them, will but lead them to more terrible destruction? But leave me, Marion, leave me alone with my God for a while. Alan must not see a trace of sorrow on my face; and for love of me, sister, guard well your own feelings. Thus much you can do for me."

"We are daughters of heroes, Kythe. As women, we cannot fight our country's battles, but the battle of life, we will not flinch from, as becomes our race."

In Kythe's pale face was reflected back the glow on Marion's.

CHAPTER VI.

MARION MAKES A GREATER CONQUEST THAN ANY SHE HAS YET ACHIEVED.

As they sat together in the evening, Sir Alan remarked that Marion looked better, her colour was returning. She raised her eyes to assure him. Suddenly, all she had heard in the morning rushed to her mind. With fluttering heart and timid eyes, she stammered an answer. Regarding her attentively, and then his wife, a fierce gleam flashed from his eyes — a strange short laugh broke from his lips.

Instantly Marion rose from her seat, and passing over to one near him, sat down upon it, laying her hand on his arm.

"Dear Alan, I am better, I owe it to you; you brought my Kythe to bless and comfort me," and she looked so steadily and confidingly in his face, that he calmed as by a spell.

"How like your voice is to your sister's, Marion; you both speak low, but so distinctly."

"Then love me for my voice, Alan, and teach me to be another Kythe."

"Ah, Marion, that is demanding too much. Had there been another like her, she might have escaped my clutches," and again one of those sad wild gleams changed his whole countenance.

"But, brother, I have need of your assistance. Very wayward and selfish have I been in my sorrow. I would wish to employ myself to do some good."

"That I can easily promise you. The Scotch people would be scandalized at the condition of your village. Our worthy Aunt Flower was met yesterday, by myself and Kirke, mud-bound in the very centre of it. She had

burdened herself with parcels, more in accordance to the dictates of her large heart, than her powers of carrying them. And this fact, coupled with the mud and her petticoats, stranded Aunt Flower."

"Shall we begin to-morrow?" asked Marion, like an eager child. "Are we bereft of all happiness, when we can do good?"

"It is the only panacea for a troubled heart," responded Sir Alan; "and it has this additional blessing, the store it yields increases with the store demanded, until the copiousness of the one brims up the other and they overflow."

"I would experience this overflow," said Marion.

"You have much to do, my little sister; that is, if you are sole mistress here, and have the power to perform what will cost both money and time."

"I will consult Mr. Hearn. There is one thing I would do at once, but, Alan dear, you must trust yourself alone with me, while I tell it."

In vain Kythe signed to her sister. Frankly she put her hand into her brother's, and drew him from the room, leaving Lady Gordon trembling at her rashness.

"I have not dared to ask Kythe about her children, you will tell me if she pines for them?"

"She would not have left them but for you."

"Say, Alan, shall we send for them unknown to her. In having her children to love, I shall the oftener pray for my own."

Marion felt that Alan's mood was an uncertain one, as the changes in his countenance told her. But she the more confidingly besought him, and linked her hands within his arm in sisterly love and trust.

If he had suspected her at all of knowing his real condition, his nature was not proof against her gentle faith in him.

He essayed to calm himself.

"Marion, they cannot all come—they are not fit."

"Therefore, brother, I was the more justified to ask you, not her."

"There are two, our eldest boy and second girl. Our longer absence is—will be an anxiety to Kythe."

"You are to decide, let us send for them."

"And my little Lilias, only because I part not from Kythe, save when God wills it, would I have left that child."

"Then you will send for those three, and make me happy?"

He consented, thanking her. When they returned, Kythe did not look up, no anxiety must her husband see in her.

At night, when they separated, she kissed and blessed Marion (who had never yet slept out of the quaint old chamber high in the gabled roof), saying:—

"Oh, May, how fearless you are; what power you seem to possess by nothing but the clear gaze of those frank eyes! It may be that, through God's blessing in coming to comfort you, I shall find peace myself."

"You are not to fear for me," whispered Marion, "remember."

Over the change that was now daily visible in Marion, Prissy gloated with an intense satisfaction.

"Did not I write that particular letter which brought my cousin Kythe here, and Sir Alan, her husband? It appears to me that I did a very wise thing, and deserve much praise."

Now Prissy said this in the hearing of the only person who was not likely to agree with her. It had formed no part of the design of Beatrice that Marion was to recover her health and spirits. On the contrary, she always intended that she should mope herself to death, as she would not revenge herself upon her husband in other fashion. That hope being over, and Marion engrossed with so many duties and cares, that her former occupation, the indulgence of her sorrow, was now apparently neglected, Beatrice began to fear her elastic spirit would free itself, and that,

with returning health and strength, not only hopes, but deeds, would take the place of her blind despondency of woe. Deplorable as the insanity of Sir Alan might be, there was a madness in the brain of Beatrice that was much more so. For it was culpable, seeing she possessed the power to control it, even when it ran to riot the strongest. It was indeed sad to witness the effect of uncontrolled passions on beauty such as that of Beatrice. Hard, indelible lines, cold, keen eyes, a yellow taint, betokening the unhealthy flow of the blood, changed her from the beautiful girl to the disappointed, ill-tempered woman. Absorbed in the one passion of a jealous hatred, like her mother, she entertained no other feeling, and suffered her youth to pass in vain longings. A woman of sense, without much refinement, would, in missing her first mark, have sought out another, and though the hand of Mr. Godfrey Asheton was certainly worthy of a struggle, he yet was not the only eligible *parti* in the county.

But few now felt any inclination to court a lady whose beauty was *passée*, and whose *fierté* of manner was sufficient to frighten the stoutest heart.

Even stupid, kind-hearted Mrs. Flower began to see the change in her step-daughter; and as, in her view of human affairs, nothing could take place without some efficient reason, she wearied herself to discover the cause; her conjectures were more marvellous than correct, winding up with one that became at last in her mind the proper one.

Beatrice was in love, and with Sir Robert Fane. An excellent match! For the sake of Beatrice, she must exert herself, and with all due observance of feminine punctilio, efforts should be made to bring matters to a happy conclusion. Nothing could be better, as a first step, than a sermon upon matrimony. Nothing could be more easy than for Mrs. Flower to ask Sir Robert's opinion upon the sermon after it was preached. Nothing more natural than that,—here Mrs. Flower paused.

The vast field of probable remarks that would ensue, all tending to the desirable point, fluttered her. As a school boy let loose into a cake shop, she was bewildered by the choice. She had ample time, however, to bring her over-redundancy of ideas into something like order, for Sir Robert was away, abroad. Marion had written to him about the propriety of sending Edward to Eton, and the answer had been received from St. Petersburgh.

What had induced Sir Robert to go there was beyond Mrs. Flower's comprehension, but that Beatrice was unhappy about his absence, was clear.

Nevertheless, nothing could be done until he returned, and that sermon was preached. Meantime, it was no wonder that Mrs. Flower could give no reason for Sir Robert's long excursion. He had none to give to himself, unless it was a certain restlessness that made him hate home, hate any place where he was compelled to stay more than a month at a time. He was tired of being a good boy; it was an-

noying having a conscience. He had been so much worried and harassed for the last eight years, it was only due to himself to think of nothing disagreeable. So he ran about the world in every direction that took him furthest from Mr. Asheton abroad, and Mrs. Asheton at home.

An excursion in a friend's yacht to St. Petersburgh— a commission from the Emperor of Russia to select horses for a cavalry regiment, and all the journeys this entailed on him —attending a few races, riding in a steeplechase or two, popping over to Paris, all these employed his time and talents very agreeably, and in some respects profitably.

It is true, Marion's pale face now and then rose up to his mental vision, but he resolutely drove it away. It is true, he very often thought of Beatrice, but, alas for poor Mrs. Flower's golden dreams and innocent simplicity, he never recalled her without dismissing her remembrance with a remark which did more than insinuate "She was somebody down below in petticoats."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SISTERS CHANGE PLACES.

It was characteristic of Marion's nature to go herself to meet the children of her sister, accompanied by the delighted Prissy. Alan was to bring Kythe to tea, in the flower-garden at Asheton Court, where the meeting was to take place, unknown to the mother. The train was due at five; at half past Marion would have conferred upon another the happiness she was without the hope of experiencing herself. But disinterestedness was the groundwork of her character, and it may fairly be questioned who felt the most joy, the one sister, who received the objects of a

secret anxiety, unexpectedly, or the other, who had been the means of bringing them to her.

Osman and Marion were beautiful and healthy children, with features and eyes resembling their mother. The eldest girl, Lilias, had her father's eyes, but the dark and light rim were so strangely contrasted, as to give the child the vague stare of idiotcy. Not that she was so, for she was the first to throw herself into Marion's arms and vehemently demand her father.

As if she was a baby still, she lay back in those arms when they were settled in the carriage, stroking Marion's hands and hair, and murmuring to herself—

"Pretty, pretty; I shall see papa, soon I shall see papa."

As he lifted her out of the carriage, she gave an unearthly scream of joy, and clinging to his neck, refused to leave him or greet her mother.

It appeared to be well understood between

the parents that her behaviour was natural, for Kythe took no heed of her waywardness.

"Now, May, I have nothing to wish for, we will spend the summer here; the change will not only be beneficial to the children, but to Alan and myself. We have endured so much at home, the very remembrance of it is painful."

"When you return, I will go with you, sister."

"Then, May, it will be home again to me. How I love you, dear; but it is a love mixed with something so holy, I know not how to describe it."

"You have no need, for perhaps it is but what I feel for you. Now to work hard, Mr. Hearn says I may use 'that money' in any way I choose. I think it will serve a more just purpose, to beautify the village and improve the estate, than that for which it was originally intended. A charm will attend it now; there was a curse upon it before.

"Oh, my May, be not bitter."

Marion put her hand on Kythe's mouth. It appeared that the younger sister would ere long control the elder. Edward was to go to Eton after midsummer, and Marion was not sorry he should have companions to prepare him previously. He was very loath to go, and she to lose him, but even as the tears filled her eyes when she spoke to him of the loss he would be to her, he knew there would be no evasion. If it was for his good, Aunt May would regard no sorrow on either part.

Meantime all their mornings were employed in the various duties of education. Kythe instituted herself Marion's governess as well as her children's. All the afternoon Marion spent with Sir Alan, riding or walking about, superintending improvements.

If Lady Gordon had done violence to her own secret wishes in imparting to any other heart than her own the dreadful secret which had so long separated her from the world, and

deprived her of all the consolations of sympathy, she now blessed God that she had done so.

Peaceful, nay happy, passed her days, and while Marion never showed the slightest perception of the mystery, Kythe was well aware that she never forgot it. She saw it in her soft and gentle manner to Sir Alan, in the care she took to amuse him, in the half coaxing, half lively girlish fascination with which she willed to have her own way, charming his gloomy moods, as David charmed the evil spirit of Saul, by the music of her words.

And lured on by an affection so true, so trusting, a change imperceptibly came over him. His eyes lost their restless wild look, his brow cleared, he smiled naturally—gleams of insane rage no longer flitted over his countenance, and the short, strange laugh was unheard.

"My leddy," said Kirke, one day, when again he found his place a sinecure, and that

Marion had gone off in sole charge of Sir Alan; "hae ye telled the young madam a'?"

"Yes, Kirke; she knows everything."

"She is venturesome; she's like the dew of a summer night to his owre heated brain."

"Do you think there is danger to her, Kirke?"

"Na, my leddy, I dinna; she has a brave heart and a clear eye. He darena' hurt one wi' luiks so fearless at him. The shadow of the Almighty is, mabe, on her. She is safe—and he hasna' wranged her, ye ken; but it's foine to see that bit slight lassie-like thing trusting herself wi' a raving madman."

"Oh, Kirke, hush! you alarm me. I must warn her."

"Ye'll ken, my leddy, Sir Alan's cough is waur; as lang as that bides, we need na trouble."

Lady Gordon's tears fell.

"I hardly thought this happiness would last."

"Dinna greet; kep up yer brave heart. Ye hae suffered mair nor ten of the worsenist sinners, and the Lord is granting ye a bit rest. Tak' it, my puir leddy, and be aye thankful; it's no' in man to tell what ills is o' the road."

"Not that, not that, Kirke, I could not bear that."

"Ou ay, did ye ever?" growled the old man in anger; "I am thinking she wad dee i' the stocks o' misery, better nor miss him."

He touched his hat, more, as it appeared, because he would not be unjust, and left her, still growling to himself.

There was something yet concealed that Kythe had not confided to Marion. It was something that touched her heart as if the hot spark of a furnace burnt in a wound that made her shrink and tremble with the slightest breath.

As she walked down to the village, now being beautified and adorned, with a taste and judgment that was duly appreciated by the

villagers, she met Alan and Marion returning.

"Oh, Kythe, how good is this life! Conferring so much pleasure by such simple means; and discovering so much that is good, honest, and quaint in the people, and their tender-heartedness, sister. They keep their children out of sight that I may not be pained at their happiness, while I am bereft. Alan, we must have the school built soon. All children shall be to me as my children. God will bless mine while I do my duty by these."

The contrast between her earnest face and the pale attenuated countenance of her husband struck Kythe forcibly.

She must speak to Marion that very evening.

"My May," she began," I wished not only to thank you for all your sweet love to my poor Alan, but to warn you not to be too rash. You know we may not trust him."

"Do not be anxious, Kythe; Alan has himself told me all."

"Marion! impossible!"

"He has; all those smothered, pent-up feelings that have been withering his brain for years. It is only when he thinks of you and his children that remorse drives him wild."

"I guessed this, May."

"Then, sister, as if to relieve his heart, he has told me many things, and whatever he said I have written down. I do not wonder at your love for one so good—so unfortunate."

"Do you think he has a purpose in this, May, and does he know you wrote down all he says?"

"He has a purpose, sister; and he knows that I record his words, for he says, 'Mark, Marion, this is for my angel to know, this is for my wife to learn, when—"

"When what, Marion? why do you pause?"

"Sister, you did not tell me all about Alan."

"How, Marion?"

"Concerning this fatal malady. That it assumes two forms."

"What had it to do with my one misery, Marion?"

"Alan dwells much upon it."

Kythe sighed.

"Yes, sister, he dwells with happiness on the idea that he may die in your arms, a conscious, sane man."

Quickly came half sobs from Lady Gordon's heart. At intervals she spoke thus:—

"'Tis true, Marion, when consumption attacks any of this fated race, the brain seems relieved, and the more the disease gains ground, the more sane they become. But when the lungs are relieved, the consumptive symptoms mitigated, insanity shows itself. Thus it has ever been, Marion. Marion, am I to take comfort from this?"

"He does, sister; he loves to dwell upon the hope of dying, conscious of the Redeemer's love, the mercy of God, the bliss of an eternity, with your eyes upon him leading him to think

of heaven, your arms round him to prove your love and forgiveness."

"I cannot—oh! Marion, I cannot give him up. May, May, let me keep him as he is; he knows me at intervals, he loves me always. I never feared him in his wildest fits. Oh, Alan, my husband, my beloved, did I ever speak of your death as a relief? Did I ever in thought murmur at my fate, if, at happy intervals, I could yet claim you as my own?"

"He knows all this, sister, just as if he read your heart; and while he thinks with pleasure of his enfeebled strength, and the warning symptoms of the more fatal, but less painful, malady, he wishes me to prepare you. Think, sister, how good God has been. Just as we require the love of each other, we have it. Had I been engrossed with other ties, I could not do as now I do—throw myself into your arms as your devoted Marion, ready to serve you."

"But I see no symptoms; you are mistaken, darling Marion, he is mistaken. Let him be

as he is, I love him all the same. He is my Alan, my husband, whether ill or well."

"Ask Kirke, sister; he will tell you that your husband's health is failing."

"He has told me—it is done."

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. ASHETON BEGINS TO DISCOVER HE IS A COMMON MORTAL.

MR. ASHETON had now been a year at Carrara, including the three hot months spent in the mountains.

During that time his children experienced the life their father had desired for them. They had no other society than his, the consul's, and that of their teachers.

He was compelled to acknowledge, wearied and heartsick, that they were not growing up into the companions he desired.

Being volatile, active children, their British blood rose above the evils of the climate, af-

fecting them more by incessant restlessness and ill-humour, than by the usual inertness and indolence. As they had no companions of their own age with whom to work off their superabundance of activity, the labour of amusing them fell upon their father, whose heavy heart and natural gravity of character was wholly unfitted for the task. Thus, they were more familiar with the servants, more shrewd regarding the small sins of their tutors, than they would have been under any other circumstances.

Gossip of a foolish sort began to be relished by them as something to enliven their monotonous lives, and as they freely told their father everything (which had always been their characteristic), it is not to be comprehended what the fastidious ears of the refined Mr. Asheton heard from lips that he had intended should pour forth exalted and noble sentiments, as the maiden in the fairy tale dropped pearls and rubies, roses and lilies.

It may be questioned if Mr. Asheton, bit-

terly as he had long felt his mistake, ever endured a sharper pang than when his intelligent boy told him, in mischievous delight, that the governess was in love with the tutor, and that the tutor was in more admiration of his sister's attendant. Dismissing both in a peremptory mood, until he could find others, he instructed the children himself, and in doing so discovered they were lamentably ignorant on the simplest matters. And while Rupert's fine disposition saved him from much evil, the little girls had no escape. Mabel was a peevish, fretful baby, though five years old, and Issa, he could not but acknowledge, was an exemplification of all the besetting sins of the Ashetons. He saw that nature laid bare in the child, and loathed it.

"Father," answered Rupert, after having been reproved three or four times for yawning, "I would do anything to please you, but I do not wish to be a gentleman."

"And what would you be?"

"A hunter of the woods, or, as the consul says he once was, a squire, with hounds and

horses, guns and dogs. Oh, father, I hate Cicero, and all the pack of them. Why do we not go home, and be squires at once?"

"Home?" echoed his father.

"Yes, home; everywhere, in every place to which we have been, I have expected to see a beautiful house, with a portico, and high steps up to the front door. Now, father, this is no fancy or dream; it must have been my home. I see a flower-garden, and the rose-trees are so high, and an old gentleman lifts me up that I may smell them, and he kisses me — always he kisses me — whenever I come near him. And my grandmamma, I see her also, leading Issa by the hand. Issa could just walk. But, father, that is not all. I see some one going in and out among the rose-trees, gathering them. She is unlike anyone I have seen anywhere, but her hair resembles Mabel's, and her eyes would be like mine, only there is something strange in them. They are always looking at me, as if they loved me more than anything in the world. Papa, I could

love her, and do anything she bid me, because she asks me to do so, with her eyes. Where is she now? Why have we not seen her all these years? Was she my mother?"

"Rupert, forbear—leave me for a time."

"Father, I am sorry. Tell me that you forgive me. If my mother is alive, I should not like her to hear I was undutiful to you. Give me that old Cicero, and I will study him in the garden until you call me. And you will tell her, will you not?"

Mr. Asheton could not understand the strange delight that ran through his veins as the boy spoke of his mother. For a year he had not heard her name—had not spoken one word of her. And even in his thoughts he had endeavoured to drive her image away. But she was there impressed upon his innermost heart. And like the veriest youth in love, he drank in the boy's remembrance of her. Yet what was she now? He had never, even in his hottest anger, believed her to have been more than imprudent, which, in his mor-

bid selfishness, was sufficient to justify the act of deserting her. But in the loftiness of his own nature, he judged that the silent manner in which he had treated that imprudence was in itself sufficient to arrest her further progress. As his course of action was one of high trust, so would hers seek to emulate it. And what then? Ah! he panted to know what then? If it were indeed so, that the love so well remembered by her son, as emanating from her eyes, had resumed its power, that, in gratitude for his forbearance, she had devoted herself to clearing the name of Asheton from even the shade of a slur, then once more they would be happy.

Indeed, he would acknowledge he had been the guiltier of the two. His wish to separate the children from their mother was unnatural, unpious. He had forgotten the laws of God, he had been unmindful of the duties of a man, he had acknowledged no other rule than his own headstrong wishes, had listened to no voice but the voice of Asheton pride.

He would allow all this, but when?

As his only companion, the consul at Carrara, Mr. Courtenay, had become more privy to Mr. Asheton's thoughts, than a ten years' acquaintance at Asheton Court would have made him.

He conjectured some unhappy event at home kept him abroad. He ransacked the English newspapers of the time that Mr. Asheton appeared at Carrara, if haply some clue might be given him in them. Being a practical man, of plain good sense, who had mixed a good deal with the world, and had experienced some of the strange kicks that fortune will now and then give even her favourites, he readily understood Mr. Asheton's character, and finally was glad to think it was rather some irritating crotchet in his own mind that banished Mr. Asheton from England, than a calamity which would be permanent in its woful results.

He conjectured that the mother of these fine but perverse children was dead, and that they

suffered in consequence from the want of that sacred influence which begins in the cradle, and ends only with death. For though but an old bachelor himself, he was so rather from an over-estimation of what is due to the weaker sex. As long as Fortune was kind to him, he meditated adding the greatest charm to his household, provided a lady could be found sufficiently sweet-tempered to bear with his sportsmanlike habits ; but the moment She frowned, he pursued his solitary way, without a thought of burdening any other heart than his own with the weight of providing for their daily bread.

To him Mr. Asheton was indebted for a new study, which both interested and benefited him. It was that of the Bible.

"I find it necessary," remarked Mr. Courtenay, "to have an answer always ready for the priests. Part of their religion consists in making proselytes, and as I am condemned to dwell in the dominions of the Pope, there is the more need that I should be capable of

arguing with them. I believe they have been rather attentive to you lately," continued he.

Mr. Asheton smiled faintly, in assent.

"I do not blame them; their lives are monotonous enough, and I give them credit for genuine feeling, when they rejoice over a heretic saved. But still, I should be disgraced in my own eyes, if I could not give answer for answer, and rather more besides. The religion that keeps itself pure amid what is both seducing and self-complacent, ought to be able to rear its head as our gray mountains do from the olive woods and peopled plains of the lower earth, clear, lofty, indisputable."

"You utter that remark for me, Courtenay; it is true, I have suffered the priests to go further with me than I intended. I had an aching void in my heart, and the whim grew within me, that I might fill it with the forms of a religion in which I was promised everything. I will adopt your advice, and judge for myself."

After his conversation with Rupert, Mr.

Asheton, unable to compose his thoughts, unlocked his desk, and took from it a miniature. Hurriedly, without opening it, he put it in his pocket, and, calling Rupert to him, set off in search of Mr. Courtenay amid the quarries. Rupert enjoyed these excursions as his chiefest happiness, and visited the many rough studios and sheds containing inestimable works of art, in various stages of progression, with the pleasure and devotion of an age much older than his own.

He had many friends among the students; and while occupying himself with one of these, who good-naturedly suffered him to try his hand at chiseling, Mr. Asheton drew Mr. Courtenay aside:—

"I have long wished to have a statue made," began Mr. Asheton, his voice considerably agitated. "Will you offer my order to any one of the students, the chiefest? Spare no money. She must be in the attitude of listening, one curl having fallen. Here is the likeness."

"Stay, stay; such an order as this, my dear sir, cannot be dismissed in so cursory a manner. Good heavens, how beautiful!" Mr. Courtenay had opened the miniature.

"Their mother, of course; the eyes and hair indicate the likeness; what love in those eyes—what an expression! My dear sir, forgive me, in losing her, your life-time would be short to mourn her. Oh, that God should have created anything so lovely, only to take her away!"

"Hush! she is not dead."

Mr. Courtenay looked from Mr. Asheton to the picture, and from the picture to him, for some minutes. Then, with a grave severity, he said:—

"The sin lies at your door, whatever may have separated you."

"It lies at my door."

"Poor man! poor man! I pity you from my soul. Return, and entreat her forgiveness; she will bestow it for the sake of the

children; otherwise, her eyes are the falsest mine ever looked into."

Mr. Asheton was silent.

"Nothing wicked could dwell under such a surface," exclaimed Mr. Courtenay, his national doggedness assuming an irritable attitude.

"I left her; I took her children from her, but with her leave; they loved her too well, too much—and then, and then—I heard a rumour; I was told—you are right, Courtenay, right—no wickedness, nothing but imprudence—"

"And that is false—excuse me, Mr. Asheton; I have respected your high tone of character, while I pitied the morbid weaknesses that blemished it. But if these have led you to be unjust, cruel towards one with a countenance like that—God's very touch upon her face—I would as lief have a murderer for a friend."

Mr. Asheton was silent.

"I am going to England next month. Let

me bring you the villain that belied her."

"In God's name, do so, and win my everlasting gratitude."

The energy with which Mr. Asheton spoke appeared to satisfy Mr. Courtenay.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. COURTENAY AGREES WITH MR. ASHETON'S JUDGEMENT OF HIMSELF.

THAT night, when the children were all wrapt in slumber, Mr. Courtenay appeared; and, as if a half-confidence was of little use, and, indeed, with that inexplicable feeling which makes a cankering grief, or some other emotion, pour itself forth (nature indemnifying herself for an over-curb by an overflow), Mr. Asheton told his whole history to Mr. Courtenay. There was so much of ignorance of the world, so much of self-delusion regarding Ashetons, so credulous a faith in absurdities, so marvellous an abhorrence of common sense, that as Mr. Courtenay listened, he

would have wept over the one, as he laughed at the other. Nevertheless, he was, with all his acuteness, unable to disentangle Mr. Asheton's story, so as to bring it into such a tangible shape that he could grasp and unriddle it at one and the same moment.

He of course knew nothing of Miss Beatrice Flower and her secret wishes.

Of Mrs. Trevor, he heard only that she was a fondly-attached sister, devoted to her brother, but too enthusiastic to be wise in her judgment. If he had been asked his opinion of her character, after hearing Mr. Asheton's story, he would have said, "She was a weak, rather silly, but affectionate person." Alas! for the clever one of the family, Mrs. Trevor Asheton that ought to have been.

But of Sir Robert Fane, he received a still more erroneous impression; and knowing nothing at all of the will concerning the Rollinston estates, Mr. Courtenay made up his mind, from all he heard of him, that to Sir Robert Fane he would go, as the kind-hearted,

worthy brother who would rush headlong to establish friendly relations between the husband and wife. But as for the young count, Mr. Courtenay was inclined to think dark things of him; and considered it probable that he must hunt him out, first and primarily, prove that his madness was a sham, call him out on the spot as a demonstration of his belief, and in shooting him do the world, and Mrs. Asheton in particular, a very great service.

"Well, I forgive you, Mr. Asheton—as a man, I forgive you for misjudging a woman, as you appear to have misjudged your wife. But I only can do so as I look at her portrait. Her eyes would look hardly on me if I did not. Sweetest creature! Talk to me of her being ignorant, uneducated—why, my dear sir, look at her, what countenance could be more intelligent; and the love, the mother's love, in her eyes! Would she not teach her children the very language of heaven? I forgive that young count too. Really he was

not so mad. I cannot but think, however, there has been underhand work—your sister now, was she at all jealous, do you think, of your pretty wife?"

"Perhaps—yes—I fear she was."

"Ha! ha! ha! humph, silly people are more given to jealousy than any others. Ha! ha! I see my way—the fog rises—a light shines on me."

Mr. Courtenay half muttered, half thundered this out, like the notes touched by an inexperienced finger on an organ."

Mrs. Trevor was probably as bad as the count. Was there a Mr. Trevor? Time would show. Mr. Courtenay would like to have the horsewhipping of some one. Mr. Asheton deserved it as much as any one.

"Pray, Sirr (Mr. Courtenay had a way of sounding his r's when excited), did it never strike you, that owing to the malevolence of some individual (would I could catch 'em) your wife's name being placed in juxtaposition with some other name, through no fault of hers, it

was the duty, the pleasure of her husband, her protector, her guardian, to have flown to her side—supported, upheld, loved, idolised her more than ever. Let me catch anyone tampering with my wife's name. By heaven! I would walk through England from one end to the other, she on my arm, and challenge the world to utter another word. I would pay court to her as if she was a queen, I would obey her slightest word, I would prize her smallest favour—I would see no other woman when she was by—and it should be through no fault of mine if slander did not slink away like a whipt cur, and malice go down to the place from which the evil natures of men are mad enough to draw her. Oh! I would, I would—oh! the base sin of leaving that poor young thing to face what you could not face alone. Do you hear, sir? You feared to encounter the breath of a rumour, and you expect she will bear the full brunt. Have you heard nothing from her?"

"Nothing."

"Very right; I'd scorn it, if I was her—very right; I admire her."

"Courtenay, you forget. I was justified—my children—the name of Asheton."

"Children, name, character, fortune, life, everything might go to the whirlwinds—but my wife—my wife is my wife—she was myself—the best part—the essence of myself. If you would live honoured, regarded, you must respect yourself, ere you have the right to demand that of others."

"By the misery I have felt, by the remorse, the futility of all my attempts at peace of mind and happiness, I know what you say is true."

"Go to her then; why don't you go now—at this moment? Leave the children with me."

"No, no; I must take them with me. There would be an alloy to her pleasure in seeing me without them."

"Come, you are not fit to go to her yet. She would but have her troubles over again with you. I was a fool to think that the prejudices of thirty years' growth and fostering

were to be wiped out in five minutes by an honest man's honest indignation. Act according to your Asheton proprieties. I shall go to England next month, and act for myself."

But, in truth, Mr. Asheton was not in a condition to do as Mr. Courtenay wished. His health was impaired by his long residence abroad; the habits and food had never agreed with him; his vexations and disappointments touched him more sensibly than they would one of a coarse nature, bringing him into that condition in which his mind was as nervous as his body.

Mr. Courtenay's indignation bewildered rather than touched him. No Asheton could have deserved such censure. They were just, let them be ever so selfish. Mr. Courtenay, drawn away by the youth and prettiness of the portrait, was no judge of the very proper and enviable peculiarities of the Asheton race. Wives were nothing, children everything. In fact, it was as Mr. Courtenay said; thirty years of inveterate consecration of themselves could not be knocked down in a moment.

Curbing his indignation as well as he could, Mr. Courtenay set himself the task of bringing the warped and diseased mind of Mr. Asheton into a more healthy condition, indemnifying himself for his forbearance by swearing all sorts of things to the beautiful image with which he was entrusted.

Taking advantage of his position, the purest piece of marble to be found was selected—the most skilful and talented of all the sculptors then at Carrara was entrusted with the work of creating "The Listening Nymph."

No lover, anxious about the portrait of his lady-love, could have exhibited more anxiety, or taken greater trouble, than Mr. Courtenay about a likeness, the original of which he had never seen.

Every evening that he could spare from his duties he spent with Mr. Asheton; and let them begin upon any other subject, they always ended with the one. Mr. Asheton all unconsciously discovered how he loved and dwelt upon the perfections of the wife he had

left so heedlessly, while Mr. Courtenay laid into the stores of one of those retentive brains that belong to matter-of-fact men, every little circumstance relating to anyone in the least connected with "The Listening Nymph."

All this was to work for fruition in time, thought Mr. Courtenay, while he sowed the seeds of other thoughts for the same purpose in Mr. Asheton's heart, and that so effectually, that had the latter been suddenly told he was never to see his Marion again, he would have belied the idea by instantly starting in search of her.

At present, however, he meant to trust everything to his friend Courtenay. And if, in the vehemence with which he took the part of the deserted Marion, he was more in her favour than he ought to be, Mr. Asheton consoled himself with the idea that it would only be known among themselves, and that, in fact, anything was better than the present state of things.

Wife-sick, home-sick, country-sick, Mr.

Asheton walked daily to a stricken and lonely pinetree that reared its gaunt form and bared limbs as in melancholy appeal to heaven for its desolate condition, and sitting at its foot, waited in equal desolation for the return of the consul from England.

CHAPTER X.

FORTUNE AT LAST REMEMBERS MRS. TREVOR, AND ASSIGNS HER A PLACE IN THE WORLD.

DURING the month that Marion spent in Scotland, she was enabled to repay her sister tenfold for the comfort she had been to herself. Alan, also, appeared to rely upon her, the sisters being actuated by but one motive, namely, the wish to render whatever portion of life might be allotted to him serene and peaceful.

As the hectic flush became settled permanently on his hollow cheek, and his cough increased beyond even Kythe's hope that the summer weather would banish it, she became earnest for his removal to another country—a warmer climate.

"If you love me, no," he exclaimed. "Would you doom me to misery, and yourself to worse? No; I am in the hands of God. I am blest, happy beyond any worth in me, ten thousand-fold, thus to die at home among my own people."

To Marion he openly spoke of his approaching death, leaving with her many injunctions, many fond words, which, in carefully writing down, she knew would appear to her sister when the final separation came, as messages from the dead, speaking peace, hope, happiness.

Very sad was it, to one whose heart was so tender, to see Kythe's two youngest children. The oldest a confirmed and hopeless idiot, and the little one, the baby—whose birth had caused his father's last and most violent fit of insanity, during which he had burst the bloodvessel that now caused his present state—so fine, so healthy a child was rarely seen. But strongly developed were the two colours in his eyes, while even in babyhood he exhibited paroxysms

of passion as violent as those of his eldest sister. No comfort was to be hoped from these two; as their years increased, their waywardness assumed its true origin—insanity. Excepting to her father, Lilias was beyond the control of any human being; and it was impossible to conjecture in what freak she would exhibit her wildness next. Her clothes had to be made of the strongest materials, and if she could not destroy them with her little white, delicate hands, she would burn them, cut them, throw herself into any pool or puddle. Yet, desired by her father to be careful, the most delicate muslin, the finest lace, was safe; and as long as she remained in his sight, she was as quiet, gentle, and loving as any little maiden of ten years of age could be. Because her father coughed, she also would cough, and that so vehemently, she brought on a diseased state of the lungs, almost as dangerous as his own, yet it did not relieve the waywardness of her brain.

She loved her Aunt Marion after her father,

though she would do nothing that she bid her by order, only from entreaty. Thus it crossed Marion's mind, whether some day it would not be well to take the charge of her, to free Kythe from so sad a care, when her heart would be distracted by the last parting from her Alan. But she was deterred from the idea by discovering how necessary the child was to her father's happiness.

Consoled in the thought of the benefit her presence had been to them all, Marion hurried back, in time to welcome Edward home for his first holidays, and to receive the report of her children's health, regularly forwarded to Mr. Hearn.

Renovated by the bracing air of the North, and glowing with the consciousness of her vocation in the world, the highest given to mortal, that of a dispenser of good, Marion delighted every one on her return by her bloom and elasticity. These were so tempered by the humility of a sacred grief—hallowing every thought, each act, with its sanctity

—that she demanded as much respect as admiration. She entered with renewed fervour into all the schemes she had begun under the auspices of Sir Alan, initiating Edward, now a tall and sensible boy, into many of them. The love she had formerly gained from pity among the people, was now hers as her right; and instead of withdrawing their healthy rosy children from the sad gaze of a bereaved mother, they rather brought them forward that she might bless them, even as she blessed the absent children of her heart.

Prissy lived on a bed of rose leaves, so happy was she, the almost constant companion of her darling May.

Meantime, what had become of Sir Robert Fane, Mrs. Trevor, and Miss Flower—those three celebrated conspirators?

Sir Robert was experiencing the fate of all those who, lending themselves to one little deceit, tumble down headlong into a whole pit of disagreeables.

None of his various journeys, none of his

great successes, none of his jovial meetings, had been attended with pleasure unalloyed. Some little vexation poisoned his best book—some trifle worried his happiest moments; he began to think he was doomed to be miserable; yet his finances were in a flourishing condition—absolutely he was laying by money. Let him just double what he had already gained, and then—then Marion's turn should come. Not but that Marion had rather disappointed him, she had so apathetically sunk into quiet submission—after all, her character was a weak one. Why need he trouble himself about a person who appeared perfectly contented? Here a twinge arrested him; he saw that hopeless, faded face looking up at him out of the bottom of his wine-glass. He looked away angrily—there it was above the lamp—now peeping out behind the screen—everywhere.

"Well, certainly she had looked miserable; how was it possible she could make herself so pitiable a sight that he could not bear the

remembrance of her, and yet live on?" He shuddered at the wickedness of this thought, and drove it away peremptorily. "He ought to go and see his son this Christmas, but really he had so foolish and tender a heart, that just as he was getting over the last sight of her, he would be worrying himself to death again with a fresh one. He would write a kind letter instead, and send for Edward to come and see him for a day or two. Then he would be able to learn from him if she was still so wretched, so woe-begone."

Edward came, and was as contented as his father that the visit should be a short one. He hated being away from his Aunt Marion, during these his first holidays, while Sir Robert could not look into his blooming face, witness his gentlemanly, intelligent manners, and hear all his boyish happiness, without pangs that he could only compare to a mental fit of the gout.

He gathered, too, that she had no intention of dying—she was never better; she must be

very active, she must be wonderfully busy, if all Edward said was true. He might go and look at her without any qualm. So at Easter he promised his boy a long visit at Asheton Court, and they parted mutually pleased.

As for the Trevors, they remained three months at Pau. Then (Fortune's blindness is lucky for some people) an old, much-despised, because hard-working, relation of Mr. Trevor's died, and left the two little mild Miss Trevors his heiresses.

At first it was supposed this was a doubtful good; but when the fact became known, that, owing to his business-like habits, which had brought on him the high displeasure of Mrs. Trevor, and the ultimate dropping of his acquaintance, he was the owner of that sum called a plum, besides a Cornish mine of much greater value than that belonging to Mr. Trevor, wonderful was the commotion.

Instantly the Miss Trevors were elevated

into a position, by their clever mamma, that was more honourable than pleasurable. But at first this good fortune was rather vexatious to Mrs. Trevor than not; she hated the hard-working relation more than ever; why had he not left his money to Mr. Trevor, the proper heir? And if her daughters must have trustees, why not have appointed herself and Mr. Trevor? If she failed to answer these questions satisfactorily, the world did not. The laborious old gentleman had not earned money with care and frugality, to bestow it upon two people, one of whom he despised, and the other despised him.

But this event brought all the Trevors home. The trustees were amiable and obliging, contrary to the usual habits of the race. They awarded the young heiresses very handsome allowances, on a scale commensurate with that station in life which is signified by being able "to drive your own carriage," not practically, but figuratively; and as they were yet too young to possess each a carriage

and all its appurtenances, their mamma kindly made room for them in hers, and used the money in various other more appropriate ways. Further, these trustees were so obliging as to think it was useless leaving the bare walls of Trevor Castle unfinished; and, though it was not to be supposed that they would spend the whole of their lives together, yet the Miss Trevors required a home at once. It would be the easiest mode to finish Trevor Castle off-hand, and leave them to settle accounts for it when they came of age. So a portion of money was bestowed for finishing Trevor Castle, and in this delightful employment—in this rise from obscure foreign life to the elevated position of mother of two heiresses—Mrs. Trevor forgot her brother, his wife, his children, everything but what had to do with the Trevors.

As for Beatrice Flower, Fortune remembered her not—Time had forgotten her.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEATH OF SIR ALAN AND OF HIS DAUGHTER, LILY.

MARION expected Sir Alan and Lady Gordon to resume their summer lodgings about April, but she received a letter in February from Kythe, entreating her to come to them.

A sudden change had taken place in Alan. From being able, though suffering from fever and cough, to take part in all their pleasures and amusements, he had sunk, as it were in a week, into the state of a confirmed invalid.

Her sister's letter was hurried; and Marion could trace by the trembling characters that she was suffering in mind.

A few lines from Alan, written strong and firm as ever, yet prepared her for what was coming:

"Come, my sister, my sweet counsellor, come to your Kythe. The time is arrived for you to take my place; and though I feel happy that she will be released, I know that without you she will suffer. Come, May, come soon, that I may lose nothing of my best gifts while I remain on earth.

"ALAN GORDON."

Marion was indeed startled at the change; but as she averted her eyes from her sister's anxious look, that she might not read the sentence written therein, she yet thanked God for the calm and happy expression in her brother's face. Those mysterious, strange eyes had lost their wild gleam—that dreary look; and as she saw the serenity portrayed therein, she was struck by their being almost of one colour. The dark rim seemed merged into the blue pupil, and, but by a scrutinizing observer, their peculiarity would not have been noticed.

"I am to lose him," said Kythe, looking

calmly up into Marion's face, as they sat over the latter's fire, on the evening of her arrival.

"Yes," said Marion, low and clear; "such is God's will."

"He seems happy to go."

"Let us thank God, sister."

"For my long life, Marion, mourning him all the time."

"For your long life, sister, thanking God for his release."

"It is so, May; and yet, now that I have you upon whom to lean, little fragile sister, my own strength has gone."

"This is natural, for you were overtaxed. But little Lily, she is changed also."

"No, I think not, May; she is pale, from being so much in her father's room; she is only good when with him."

"I noticed, sister, that the two colours in her eyes are most vivid, while Alan's are almost absorbed in each other. What does that mean?"

"She is very, very wild, dear May," said Kythe, evasively. "When her father, when he—ah, Marion!—when he goes, what shall I do with her? Kirke says he never saw any show such symptoms so young; and she hates him. She will not suffer him to come near her; without the slightest cause for so doing, she always calls him 'the mad people's keeper.' My Lily, my pretty Lily, is quite insane, without a lucid interval but when with her father."

There was no comfort to be gained in talking over this. But Marion set herself seriously to work to support her sister through her trials.

Many hours did she sit by the sick man's side, as he slowly sank into the grave. No unhappiness was there, nothing but peaceful content. He waited patiently for his summons. Sometimes they beguiled the hours, comparing their blessings and troubles; sometimes he poured forth his many wishes and hopes for the future welfare of those on

earth whom he was soon only to watch from heaven.

In the eldest boy, he knew Kythe would have comfort and assistance, for he gave every promise of being all that the fondest parents could wish. The second girl was also equally a delight to them both. He made an ample provision for the poor little idiot; and many times he committed the youngest boy to Kirke's care, saying, "You are old, Kirke, and I am the third generation that have had to trust to you; but I leave my little son to your charge; you must educate a relation of your own to be to him what you have been to me."

But of Lily, the eldest girl, about whom mother and aunt were so anxious, whose age —the third in the family—might warrant her being cared for among the first, he never spoke.

At her sister's request, Marion asked him about her; the child was lying near him on the floor, all wet and dripping from having run into the brook, wild and uncontrollable;

and when entreated by both her mother and governess to change, she had refused in a burst of rage. Then, as they proceeded to do it by force, for she was almost as ill as her father, she had slipt from their fingers, and flying to her father's room, lay there panting and scowling, though silent.

"Kythe is anxious about little Lily, Alan, —see, she is all wet, she has been in the brook. Do, darling, let me take off your wet things."

"I won't," said the child.

"Remember how ill you are," remonstrated Marion.

"Lily, go and do as mamma wishes you," said her father.

The child rose and went out rapidly. "You have given no orders about Lily," said Marion, her voice trembling.

"There will be no need, May," he answered quietly.

Marion paused, and then said:—

"I mean, Alan, orders such as you have

given me about Kythe and the other children."

"Still I say there is no need to do so, dear May."

"Perhaps you do not know that with you only is she good and quiet; beyond this room—"

"She is insane," interrupted her brother. "Can I not see the fatal sign, Marion. Nevertheless, be not troubled. God is merciful. Kythe has borne her share of the misfortunes of our family. The worst and maddest (for none ever were mad so young as this child) of all our race will not be left a sad bequest by me to her poor mother. My poor little Lily is provided for by her Father in heaven."

As he grew weaker, so did his beautiful spirit shine out more and more, until the mourning. Kythe could no longer weep. It seemed an ungrateful mockery towards God to wish to stay a soul so pure, so penitent, so anxious to be gone.

"Ah, Kythe, none of my race, marked as I am, ever before died thus, with loving eyes watching him, and he conscious thereof. I am blest indeed. You must remember this, sweet wife, that, had I lived much longer with the incurable wound on my mind of having injured you, I must have become permanently insane, and thus lost to you by worse than death. Our sister, our dear May, saved me from this. I was on the very verge when her sweet eyes returned my look of madness with one of sisterly love. Into those eyes I could look, knowing I had not injured them; their affection I could dwell upon, and it did me good to think she loved and trusted in a madman. I became sane from that very hour, May, and Kythe and I owe to you this blessed parting, this sweet leavetaking. You must let Lily stay up to-night, my wife, I cannot spare her from my side."

"Thank you, Alan, for she is sadly ill and fretful. She is only quiet in your room, and has not slept for some nights."

"Lily, will you sleep?" said her father.

"Yes, papa; on your knee."

"Your father is too weak, Lily, come to me."

"No; I will not leave papa; the angels are in the room, they are watching to take him from me, if I let go my hold."

"I will not go without you, Lily," said her father; "so sleep once more on your mother's knee."

"Mamma, mamma," said the child, kissing and hanging about her with an affection she had not shown for months, "dear, sweet mamma, when papa and Lily go away, the evil spirit will leave her, and the two brightest stars in heaven will be us two, watching over and guarding you, looking down upon you all."

"My Lily is always good, when she likes," said her mother.

"No, mamma, I shall never be good here, so let me sleep once more in your arms."

For some hours Marion and Kythe sat silent and quiet by the dying bed of the husband

and brother, the little girl sleeping as if exhausted, all the time. Then Alan woke, as with a start—

"Stay, stay," he cried, in half delirium, "my little child, I must have her. Lily! Lily!"

She awoke at his voice, and springing into his arms, now feebly stretched out, she said:—

"Good-bye, mamma, papa cannot go without his Lily."

"Kythe, Kythe, injured one—forgive, forgive."

Marion tried to lift the child from his clasp, that the poor wife might catch these last words, feel the last sigh of him whom she had loved so well, for whom she had borne so much. But they clasped each other closely. From which came those few gasps, each longer, fainter than the last—who breathed that low, faint sigh, neither Marion nor Kythe could tell.

"Alan, dearest, most loved, speak but one word to your Kythe."

The word came not.

"He is gone," she murmured, "or he would have replied. We must remove the child."

A cry from Marion startled her in that solemn moment. That clasp was death within death. The little child was dead in her dead father's arms. And thus were they buried.

CHAPTER XII.

MARION HEARS NEWS OF HER CHILDREN, AND PRISSY ENCOUNTERS A GREAT DANGER.

Lady Gordon desired, as the greatest boon her sister could bestow on her, that she might be left in solitude for a few months. Trials such as hers had been, required time to restore the mind to its proper tone. The education of her two children would be employment sufficient to prevent her wholly dwelling upon her grief. Marion acquiesced, feeling that her decision might have been the same under similar circumstances; and, having extorted a promise that June should restore them again to each other, Lady Gordon coming south, Ma-

rion once more found herself at Asheton Court, a little before Easter.

"Dear May," was Prissy's greeting, "do you know that Beatrice is very ill, and mamma says she is in love? Think of that now; did you ever know anyone so stupid?"

"Oh, Prissy, don't you love me?"

"Oh, ho! don't you think to put me off that way; there are all sorts of love, and love for you is one of the best. Is Sir Robert coming soon?"

"Do you mean Beatrice is in love with Sir Robert?"

"My goodness, gracious! now, don't, May. I was not to tell any one, but mamma bid me find out from you if he was coming."

"Yes; he is to be here for ten days about Easter week, during Edward's holidays. Stephenson has already begun to air a room for him."

"I don't agree with mamma, May; of course, if he had been in love with Beatrice, he would have come long ago and proposed."

"Of course, Prissy."

"I suppose the next time you go to Scotland, I may go?"

"Yes, that is settled."

"Do you know that Julian is out, released? He has left the asylum."

"Has he, poor fellow. I never thought him mad, only perverted, Prissy. Some one persuaded him to all he did."

"Some gentleman from Italy went to see him, and answered for his sanity. Julian is so grateful. He has been to see us."

"I hope you were kind to him."

"Yes, very; only think, Beatrice would not see him; she went off to Miss Walker's, and there she means to stay, until he leaves for Italy—her own cousin!"

A pause—

"Julian wants to see you."

"I shall be very glad to see him; where is he?"

"Down at Maxwell's lodgings, with this gentleman—such a nice old gentleman."

"I shall be on the sands this evening; tell him to come to me then."

Time and incarceration had done wonders for Count Julian; and if the fairness of Marion's appearance was all the more striking from the blackness of her dress, he resolutely kept his feelings under control.

"I wished to see you, to bid you farewell; I have had much of England—too much. I have been deceived, and was told you loved me, Mrs. Asheton; this gentleman, my preserver, my Mentor, my wise friend, has proved to me how wrong I have been. Pure, cold, English girl, one who ought to have been my best friend deceived me, led me on—brought me to this disaster. I am not mad, I was not ever mad; but when I was advised that you were ill-used, neglected, forsaken, as a man, I was all of rage."

"That is sufficient, count—need we say more?"

"Yes, one little more. I was told, in that my mad act of coming to Madam Ashe-

ton, that the divorce is of easy make to English people now—that Mr. Asheton was anxious for that, because he love my cousin Beatrice."

"Sir," exclaimed Marion, "who belied Mr. Asheton thus?"

"Madam," said the count's stranger friend, coming forward, "it was very well known abroad that Mr. Asheton consulted Miss Flower upon all matters concerning his children, and rumour declared his wife to be insane—"

"Pardon me, sir," you are a stranger to both Mr. Asheton and myself—"

"No, no—not to Mr. Asheton—"

"Sir, sir, did you see—did you know my children?" And with her whole face in a glow, her hands extended in earnest entreaty, Marion bent forward with a pitiful beseeching in her face.

"The very attitude! God love you, my dear, sweet girl—I know them quite well, and love them as if they were my own."

"Oh, you dear, nice old man," exclaimed

Prissy, laughing and crying at once, and feeling strongly inclined to pat him on the back.

"Not so old either, ma'am," answered he, smiling. Both he and Prissy were willing to let the little mother recover herself.

But she could not speak at once. She took his hands in her own and clasped them.

"Yes," he said, as an answer, "they have touched them often, stroked their pretty hair. They have forgotten their mother, I fear, that you must expect, all but Rupert. I can warrant he remembers you."

"Thank you, sir," said Marion, simply.

It was all she could say for the present. The large tears ran down his own face.

Prissy kept on unconsciously saying—

"Oh, you nice, dear man!"

Suddenly, as if a thought struck her, Marion calmed herself, and said:—

"Sir, as you know Mr. Asheton, you can tell the count his aspersion is false."

"True, my dear; pray excuse me—but he leaves you."

"That may be, sir; but when the sea is dry, you may think that of Mr. Asheton which he says."

"Don't, don't, my dear, sweet lady, look like that. If ever there was an honourable, upright, ridiculous fool of a man, it is Mr. Asheton, and the count knows it too."

"Just my opinion," chimed in Prissy, blowing her nose violently in corroboration.

"Enough," said Marion, with that stateliness which sat so gracefully on her slight figure.

"The count returns with me to Italy; we are going to see Mr. Asheton," continued the unknown; "he has been deceived too."

"Sir," said Marion coldly, "Mr. Asheton is not likely to be unjust. Even though he may not be prudent in his wishes regarding his children, he judges their mother as he would himself, sir. Are my children merry, sir?"

The hardest heart must have melted at the

innocent love and earnestness with which Marion plied the stranger with questions regarding those so long lost to her, while he was reduced to as violent a state of nose-blowing as Prissy.

As Count Julian gazed on this scene, he dismissed at once from his heart the fatal idea, fostered by evil minds, that Marion had ever returned his affection. The rough hands, the broad, deeply pitted, weather-beaten face of his friend were far more lovely in her eyes than all the count's beauty and perfections—merely because he had seen her children.

Divine as might be the sentiment, it was not a feeling to which he could in the least respond. He felt that Prissy's heart was much more tender and lovable.

"I should like very much to see Asheton Court, if I might," said the stranger; "to-morrow we go to visit that Miss Beatrice, who has fled from us. I have some other business that will detain me in England a week or ten days; after that, dear young lady, if you

have any little gifts, messages, or words for your children, make me the bearer of them."

"You will discover their father's wishes first, before you give them, sir," continued Marion, all in a glow to think the impenetrable barrier that appeared to separate her from her children, as death might have done, could happily be lifted up, if but for a moment.

He promised. Marion, too much excited to say more, went home and delighted the heart of Stephenson, and, through her, all the rest of the household, by the news of having spoken to a gentleman who knew her children well.

What pretty presents she prepared for them! What tender little letters she wrote to them!—so gently worded, that their father would be unable to find even a thought that would war against his sensitiveness.

Prissy, early the next morning, took the unknown over the whole house and all the gardens, and he was as indefatigable in visiting

every hole and corner as she was in showing them. He asked permission to see Marion once more, kissing her hand, upon leave given, with the air of a devotee to his saint. Then, as he departed with the count for the abode of the Lady Superior (they intended taking Beatrice by surprise), he did the same by the amiable Prissy, only after a gallant fashion.

"The very nicest man, May, you ever saw; far better than your counts or Sir Roberts, or any thing of that sort. If he loved a woman, he would say so at once; and only think, May, he is but forty-six years old. I took him quite for fifty—didn't you?"

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. FLOWER TRIES HER TALENTS AT MATCH-MAKING, AND LIGHTS A SPARK, BUT NOT THE ONE SHE INTENDED.

Sir Robert came. Marion was surprised at the change in him. When people don't keep their hearts bright and pure, the eyes and the countenance partake of the darkness within. He was much aged, and he was surprised in his turn at the difference in Marion. Not only surprised, but indignant; she had no business to look so well—to look as if she might live to be a centenarian. Stephenson being an old friend of his, he went to gossip

out his thoughts to her warily, so that he might gain a vast lot in return.

"Yes, truly," remarked Stephenson, "it was delightful to see the young madam, and what good she was doing. Up at six every morning, and never idle from morning till night, Sir Robert."

"I suppose she has lost all feeling then, and ceases to care for the children?"

"Oh, dear goodness, no, Sir Robert; not a week ago, sir, a gentleman came here, who had seen Mr. Asheton and the children—"

"A man marked with small-pox, weather-beaten, Courtenay by name, looking much older than he is—"

"I don't know his name, Sir Robert," answered Stephenson, all on the prim, from the vehemence with which Sir Robert spoke; "but probably Miss Prissy does."

"Very good, go on. I was just surprised; that was all."

But Stephenson had her misgivings about that surprise; it was not a pleasant one. Be-

sides, Sir Robert's countenance was not now capable of being masked over; the lines were too strong, the habitual thought of his heart was stamped on it visibly, and it was evidently a very unpleasing, not to say bad, thought.

However, she talked on, and when he had got as much out of her as he wished, he departed in search of Prissy.

"The nicest man that ever was; but as to thinking what his name was, indeed Prissy never thought it a bit necessary."

Thoughtfully Sir Robert pursued his way to the Woodhead the next day, if haply he might find Miss Flower alone.

On the alert, vigilant and expectant, he met Mrs. Flower. She had heard of his arrival, and had been in the fidgets ever since.

"Mr. Flower well, Mrs. Flower he saw blooming as ever, was sorry to hear Miss Flower was not so well—called to inquire after her health; hoped he might be considered an old friend, and that she would vouchsafe to see him."

Mrs. Flower's head spun round with ecstasy, but giving herself a severe pinch to call herself to order, at which in the simplicity of her heart she was nearly shrieking out, and, at all events, made an unamiable face, when she was feeling quite the reverse, she gave him to understand Beatrice would be delighted to see him—she was sitting in the garden. Mrs. Flower was rather busy herself, in fact, had an especial appointment with Sarah Jones about flannel waistcoats, for Samuel Jones was cruelly distracted with rheumatism; but whatever happened, Sir Robert must remain till she returned."

He half promised, and off she went. But, oh, that anyone should have to record of innocent, simple Mrs. Flower, that she was a deep designer, the hatcher of a plot, in which she was not only the hen that laid the egg, but the chicken that was to be developed. She was the very plot itself.

A seat had been designed by herself, and given up to Beatrice as her seat. It was on

the cliff, yet so situated that, whatever was said in it, the words rose up in clear distinctness to that oriel window aforetime mentioned, which, in an earlier part of this history, was adorned with chintz curtains, gaily scattered over with cabbage roses and trellis bars. Those beautiful curtains were now deposed, and doing duty in the window above, their higher elevation betokening a lower lot, while stone-coloured moreen, elegantly bound with yellow worsted binding, now shaded the oriel window.

For some weeks past, that deep, designing Mrs. Flower had insisted upon the concoction of those admirable sermons taking place within the oriel window. All unknown to himself, Mr. Flower was taking a part in his wife's plot, the exact reverse of what he really would have done had he known it. But she had her private ideas of Sir Robert. If he had been playing with the feelings of Beatrice, at all events some ears, and those the most proper ones, her own father's, should hear of it, and

then be able to bring the base deceiver to book. About this last fact, Mrs. Flower was not very sanguine. It was more than probable her Constant would remain quiescent, rather than act the indignant father. But matters had prospered so happily, so quickly as yet, she stumped away to the village in full persuasion that, on her return home, she should find an interesting tableau ready for her, to rush in and take her share.

Good Mr. Flower certainly would never have acted the part of eavesdropper intentionally. He heard voices, but he the more readily devoted himself to his sermon, that he might shut out the sense of them. He succeeded in doing so for some time, but a loud and impassioned exclamation, uttered in a voice that bore a terrible resemblance to one heard long ago, and which made him turn cold as he thought of it, roused him.

"I hate her, I have told you I hate her. This man, who forced himself into my presence with Julian, has been sent by Mr. Ashe-

ton to detect or unravel any mystery. Here is Mrs. Trevor's letter, he has been to her, though, of course, she cares little now whether Mr. Asheton returns home or not. But he shall not, he shall not, while I live. Have you no spirit in you, Sir Robert, that you can think of nothing to keep them still apart?"

Up to this moment Mr. Flower had listened involuntarily, and with a puzzled air. Gradually, his handsome but rather stolid face assumed as many expressions as if he had the apparatus of dissolving views in his head. First, horror, then delight—disgust—hope—indignant anger—devout gratitude. Lastly, a deep shame fell upon him, and he sat down, his hands covering his face.

Popping about the village, as if her legs were entirely made of cork, in and out of every house, not only to pass away the time, but to occupy her excited feelings, Mrs. Flower danced merrily home, after what she considered a fit and proper time had elapsed. Now for the tableau.

Cautiously opening the drawing-room door,

in case the parties performing the tableau were not all arranged as they might wish to be, she peeped in. Excepting the kitten, there were no actors. What could the kitten be playing with? Surely—yes, too surely, it was Constant's own peculiar ink-bottle.

How is it that, when things are upset, the ink-bottle is sure to thrust itself into the mess, overturn itself in the most inconvenient and conspicuous spot in the room? What an indelible black mark there was on the new piece of drugget, just where it joined the carpet. You could not look into the oriel window without seeing it. And the kitten had pranced in and out of the murky pond, evidantly bent on discovering the source of so wonderful a thing, and had printed unconsciously, and without studying effect, her little foot-marks, all over the room, on the chairs, along the sofa, even up on the table-cloth, which in careless, easy households, is sometimes left from breakfast, ready laid to do duty for dinner.

But the sermon. Mrs. Flower frantically rushed forward to save the loose sheets of paper scattered in dangerous proximity to the ink pond. Fortunately, there did not appear much of it written.

Mrs. Flower calmed herself under the most provoking trial of domestic life (which the upsetting of ink is, there being no possibility of washing out the stain and remembrance together), because, of course, the accident had been the effect of some startling event. Banishing the kitten, collecting the precious papers, ordering hot water and soap, Mrs. Flower, leaving matters in a train to mend, proceeded to the garden. No one there, she rummaged the house; at last she did what would have been her wisest course at first—she asked the servant for news of her master.

"Master left a message for you, ma'am;—you was'nt to wait dinner. He was gone on business to N——, and meant to call on Dr. Ford, and would'nt be home perhaps till tea."

Utterly confounded by a line of conduct

deviating in the wildest manner from anything that he had ever done before, during the twenty three years she had known him, Mrs. Flower forgot all about the tableau and the actors therein.

She felt like a sleep-walker, and in her comatose state, dabbled her fingers into the ink stains, on the tablecloth (whose turn had not come to be looked after), and unconciously enlarged and added to them. Nothing but its being twitched violently from her grasp, by the indignant servant, roused her.

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW THE FLOWERS ENJOYED TRAVELLING.

Sad as was the condition of Mrs. Flower when last we mentioned her, she was, now that we see her again, in a much more pitiable plight. And many kind, experienced people will pity her, if they have endured what she was now enduring, the miseries of a passage from London to Ostend, with a chopping sea and an adverse wind.

She and Prissy both declare they did die that very night, though how they came to life again, they are incompetent to tell.

But the miseries of that, their first night at

sea, faded before the realities of a land journey in a foreign country.

Both Mr. Flower and Beatrice were with them; indeed, it was on account of Beatrice that they had left home so suddenly, Dr. Ford having advised her instant removal to her native land. Yet, as Mr. Flower did not appear under any very great anxiety about her, even consenting to her own wish that she should remain with some friends at Pau, while they left her, and went on to Italy, it is to be supposed he could plot as well as his wife. As long as Beatrice was of their party, they managed very well; she knew everything, language and money. But when she was left behind, and they had to depend upon the little that Mr. Flower remembered, their state resembled that of Esquimaux put down suddenly in the heart of London.

What Mr. Flower did know was smothered in the running English commentary that Mrs. Flower and Prissy kept up upon every state of perplexity into which they fell.

"Don't believe them, Constant, whatever they may say. Look into our boxes, indeed, what will they want next, the inquisitive, mean things. We have as good things in our boxes as any one, I am sure."

"Oh, papa, don't let that man come near you; I am sure he is a bandit. What can he mean grinning at me, and what's that he's saying? 'Spak Inglis,' what does he mean? Tell him, papa, I won't have him grin so—where are the police?"

"Oh, Constant, Constant, why did you bring us to such a horrible country?"

"My dear Sophy, be reasonable. It is absolutely necessary we travel about until I can find Mr. Asheton. While I have been flattering myself I was doing my duty, a terrible crime has been perpetrated under my very eyes, one of the actors in it being a member of my own household. I take bitter shame to myself, that I did not (as became me, her nearest male relative) exert myself to know why Mr. Asheton left our pretty May so

cruelly. I, sinfully indolent, concluded he had always intended to leave her, because of that clause in the settlements. But my daughter Beatrice (alas! too like her mother), that gambling, needy Sir Robert Fane, and, I fear, Mrs. Trevor, have together been the sole cause that he did not return home. I cared not to tell you this before, lest you might, in a heedless moment, suffer some words to slip, by which Sir Robert would take alarm. And, above all, I did not wish Beatrice to know. As the best amends I could make my poor Marion, I went instantly to N——, and engaged a clergyman to do my work for an indefinite period. I told Dr. Ford partly the truth, and he, to assist me, ordered Beatrice to Italy. I had, as you know, often talked of going once more to Rome, and taking you and Prissy. This appeared to me the most natural thing to do; besides, I should require your testimony to add to mine, in regard to proving our Marion's perfect innocence. I should like to have brought Stephenson for the same pur-

pose, but I feared not only to excite suspicion, but hope, in Marion's heart. Therefore aid me, my dear wife, in repairing a great wrong; and do you, Prissy, exert yourself. I do not intend to return home until I have found Mr. Asheton."

"Goodness, gracious me! if I travel in this horrible country all my life, neither will I."

But Mrs. Flower could not speak. She must put her thoughts into something like intelligible order ere she could venture to give voice to the vast volume of chaotic ideas that floated through her brain, raised by her husband's words.

Many more miseries did they endure; but while she was almost unconscious of them, Prissy bore them with unflinching zeal, nay, with a stern sort of martyr-like joy—would she not have full revenge when Mr. Asheton was before her? But human endurance has a limit.

Knowing that Mr. Asheton had sent his last bulletin of the children from La Spezzia,

as a quicker and more convenient mode of travelling, Mr. Flower decided to go there by sea. A small, crazy, old coasting steamer offering itself, and believing the report of the captain, that she was old only in paint, but perfectly new in other respects, the amiable Flower family decided to trust themselves within her. Mrs. Flower's bones ached so terribly from the long, slow, night-and-day journeys of foreign railways, that she looked forward with pleasure to being quiet, cool, and unshaken on the bosom of that liquid sapphire sea. Thirty hours of fresh sea air, and the power of walking ten steps to and fro at any moment they chose—there was luxury in the very thought.

But the fresh air was not sufficiently fresh to drive away the combined smells of train oil, bilge water, and frying onions, which piece of cookery was going on always.

Also the engine panted, puffed, groaned, squealed, so like suffering humanity, that Mrs. Flower was alternately indignant and alarmed.

However, it was only for thirty hours; Prissy became paler and more pale; the odours were too many for her. To have gone below would have put an end to her at once.

Mrs. Flower at last succumbed altogether. This quiet, calm blue sea was as treacherous to her internal economy as the angry channel between England and Belgium. Mr. Flower was very uneasy, mentally as well as bodily. New vessels did not require such incessant pumping. Forty hours passed, for the last ten of which they had been almost stationary. The fuel was expended. The idle, indolent, strongly-scented crew at last bethought themselves of putting up a sail, to catch the breath of wind that was flying about in little whiffs like a baby's laugh. Mr. Flower went to look over their store of food provided for thirty hours. It was considerably diminished. He could have eaten it all himself at one meal. Sixty hours went by. They approached a reedy, low shore, with a fishing village near. The evening set in dark, with heavy round

clouds rolling up, shouldering each other with ominous impatience. Mr. Flower wished to go ashore and buy food. He was told, if he went ashore, he must signal for a boat, and they further intimated there was no necessity for him to return.

"But I have paid my passage to La Spezzia."

"No doubt; the signor had done so; the signor was a just man."

"Then you must take me there."

"It was not good; the signor had better go at once. La Spezzia was far, very far—thirty hours."

"I insist upon being taken there."

"Ah, well, ah, well—if Our Lady pleased, they would get there sometime.

Heavily rolled the rotten old boat all that night. Angry seas were as common, if not more so, in the Mediterranean, as in British channels. Twenty times, and double that, did Mr. Flower regret he had not taken the captain's advice, disregarded the money paid, and

gone on shore. As the day dawned, Mrs. Flower was only capable of saying, "Take me home, take me home." Prissy was nearly as bad; and Mr. Flower was ravenously hungry, as well as anxious, and they had not one morsel of food left.

"Where are we now?"

"Ah, bah! there La Spezzia. Thirty hours beating up—bad wind."

"Then we must land."

"Ah, bah! the signor had reason now, but he must wait. Our Lady must blow them nearer shore."

It was not until four o'clock that our unhappy travellers found themselves once more on land, and even then they could not felicitate themselves much. They were surrounded by a crowd of staring people, half naked, indeed, the children wholly so, to Mrs. Flower's horror and Prissy's shock. As for regarding Mr. Flower's entreaties for something to eat, until they had had ample time to investigate every minutia regarding the party, his complaints

were unheeded. Slowly, and by way of favour, one brought a water melon, another held up some fresh, earth-sprinkled garlic, a third handed a loaf of black bread, not so black as the hand that tendered it.

Sitting on their different packages, exposed to the unabashed gaze of an uncivilized multitude, the food given to allay their ravenous hunger (lucky it was ravenous), such as English dogs would have rejected, forlorn as to their present state, hopeless as to their future, the three poor Flowers sat, silent and miserable.

"Oh, oh, oh," the last Prissy enunciated with a sound approaching a scream; "my goodness, gracious me, can it be him? We are saved, we are saved; the very nicest, dearest, best man of the whole world."

And before them, in wonder as great as their misery, stood the unknown.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. ASHETON ACKNOWLEDGES WITH PLEASURE THAT HE HAS AN AUNT FLOWER.

Mr. Courtenay and Count Julian di Ramiano —there they were in full bodily presence. There was the carriage that had brought them, and in the distance might be descried coming, a very nice English carriage, with good, stout, English horses, and a bluff English-looking coachman. No one knew how it was accomplished, but in two hours from that time, Mr., Mrs. and Miss Flower were seated in a beautiful and spacious appartment, ornamented with every description of thing that could be made of white marble or alabaster, even to the very footstool,

and partaking of a real English tea. And the nicest man in the world was making the tea, but not thinking he was making half enough of the unfortunate travellers.

An explanation had taken place between Mr. Flower and Mr. Courtenay, which at present showed no other fruit than an incessant shaking of hands, and laudatory epithets bestowed upon each other without stint.

"I was taking the count for the very purpose, it's not a mile from here; we must go at once—that is, soon. The children will be in bed by nine. We will have it out with him this very night. Are the ladies equal?

Equal! the ladies were insulted; and to prove their powers, they set off at once. Allowing for their exhilaration spending itself a little on the way, the two gentlemen waited for Mr. Flower, who had an Englishman's habit of washing his hands and face, brushing his hair and coat, as preliminaries to any enterprise.

But like corks long bound down in igno-

minious slavery within the necks of bottles, Mrs. Flower and Prissy darted off with a spirit and an energy nothing could daunt. Had they endured perils of sea, of land, of men, to be baulked at the last moment of the prize for which they had borne so much. Rapidly plied their stout English feet down the shingly path, at the very notion. They could not mistake the way. This path alone led to Mr. Asheton's villa. In vain the evening closed in with a soft beauty that lingered as if deeply loving the very scenes it created. Ungreeted was the moon rising with such saintly majesty over the dark blue trees, and lighting up their path with a clear radiance that might shame the day.

"It's lucky there's a moon," was all that matter-of-fact Prissy vouchsafed to say.

Mr. Asheton had kissed and blessed his children as they lay in their beds for the night. Then, in deference to a sort of restlessness that had lately wholly prevented him from sleeping until he had wearied himself almost to fainting,

he was preparing himself for his nightly pacing to and fro from his own door to the desolate pine tree, when a familiar, yet long unheard, voice smote upon his ear.

"It is such a shocking thing, my dear, living amongst people who can't speak—that is, who can't speak English. It's all very well telling me that's a language, I'll never believe it; it's nothing but a clicking and a clacking of the jaws. It must be obstinacy. Now, I'll try him once more, as plain as I can say it. Tell Mr. Asheton Mrs. Flower wants to see him."

"My dear, dear Mrs. Flower, Aunt Flower, say, you come from my Marion?"

"Oh! you dreadful hard-hearted—oh! dear Mr. Asheton—yes, yes, of course I do—"

"The dearest, sweetest, most injured—"

"Constant is here, he will tell you all—"

"You have almost killed her—only she is getting better—"

"How could you believe such things—"

"You don't deserve her—"

This volley of words shot itself off at Mr. Asheton's head, in less time than it takes to tell.

Luckily the three gentlemen joined the scene of action. Whatever other hard words and bitter recoilings had been got ready to hurl at Mr. Asheton, they were all suddenly forgotten. Pity and kind feeling took their place. He indeed required both.

"Tell me no more," he said faintly, "I would hear no more—it is due to my wife."

"That is true," said Mr. Courtenay; "but *(sotto voce)* I'll make you hear what she said to me, of you, my friend, ere we die. I owe her that, the darling fair pet."

"Courtenay, help me; I would go now, at once. Oh! Aunt Flower, forgive me—pity me."

"Dear, dear, poor man—so altered too, quite old. Of course, nothing but forgiveness, love, and delight."

"All is ready, Mr. Asheton. My horses I detained, as I travelled to-day, at the different

posts, promising them return fare, as we say in England. You cannot start until day dawns; then, I'll answer for it, no moment will be lost."

"Orders—I must give orders."

"No, no, rest; the ladies will do the packing, and see to get things ready. Remember, you have much before you. There is not such another wife in the world as yours, and you must try and get up your good looks, or she will not know you. Sit down, I have some good news to tell you about myself.

Mr. Asheton acquiesced, because he had not strength to argue. Mrs. Flower and Prissy went upstairs to give the necessary orders, and see them executed. And they were both extremely touched by the sad and tender look with which Mr. Asheton's eyes followed them out of the room. He was paying a sort of homage to the name of Flower.

They were not able to resist a peep at the children, May's children, whom she loved so fondly—had lost so long.

Rupert, lying back on his white pillow, looked, with his flushed cheeks, open mouth, and magnificent curls, one hand buried in them, like a young God of beauty; and if they did not admire the girls so much, it was because they saw him first. The fondest mother could not have beheld in her dreams a more beautiful image of a child to dote on than Rupert."

And when, disturbed by the vehemence with which they imagined they whispered their admiration, he awoke, and opened eyes exactly like Marion's, Prissy uttered a little shriek of delight.

Nothing daunted by this unexpected apparition, and this sudden disturbance of his sleep, the young gentleman raised himself on his elbow, and steadily gazed at them.

Evidently satisfied with his scrutiny, he held out his hand in amity, saying:—

"You are English people; I am glad to see you."

"And so are we to see you, you darling boy."

"Did you come from England to-night?"

"Yes; we have just arrived."

"Oh, madam, did you see?—have I a mother in England?

"Yes, dearest Rupert, she is there waiting for you. You are going home to see her to-morrow."

With a passionate sob, he threw himself back, and boylike, he buried his face in the pillow, to hide his tears. In vain they tried to calm him, coax him, and make him look up—he only buried himself deeper in the clothes.

"Let us leave him, mamma; Mr. Asheton may be angry with us that we woke him at all; we have much to do."

As they busied themselves in directing the servants what to get ready, and what to leave for less rapid conveyance, Prissy felt herself twitched by the sleeve. Turning sharply round, more from the effect a sudden surprise had on her nerves than from any other feeling, Prissy saw, wrapt in a sheet, the

beautiful boy looking beseechingly at her, his eyelashes heavy with tear-drops.

"Ma'am, do you think my mother loves me?"

"That she does; she nearly died because you were taken from her."

Mr. Courtenay at that moment appearing, to see how they were progressing, snatched the boy up in his arms, and kissing him, said:—

"Love you, my boy, never doubt it. Now mark my words; when you get to Asheton Court, in the garden you will come to a spot where there is a curious old yew tree cut into a round shape, as you think when you first see it, but there is a pathway through it, follow that, and then you will be answered as to your mother's love."

"Dear old Courtenay," whispered the boy; "but I have been making something; I always meant it for my mother; it is in the studio of Felix."

"I'll go and fetch it; you shall take it

home with you. Even though it's now the middle of the night, I'll rouse up Felix. Besides, they will all want to bid you farewell."

There was no sleep that night at the villa, but for the two little girls. Though Rupert returned to bed, every time Prissy looked in at him, Marion's eyes looked out, smiling and starlike.

"Bless the boy, what a darling he is!"

The Flowers were to be Mr. Courtenay's guests, in order to recruit their nerves, and then, under his escort, were to return to England. His good news regarding himself consisted in his being appointed agent for Carrara marble in London. Consequently another consul was about to be sent by government to Carrara, and he was expected in ten days. Mr. Courtenay was well disposed to bestir himself in expediting matters. He was too stout an Englishman at heart to bear a long separation from his country, and though in pecuniary matters he was not much the better,

he desired no greater luck than being able to return there.

As for Prissy, when she came to know that they were to travel back to England under the escort of "the nicest man in the world," this journey (about which she and her mother had many misgivings they should never perform and survive) became quite a pleasant matter to think about.

Regarding Count Julian, Mr. Asheton steadily refused to hear one word of what they had all come such a long distance to tell him, showing his remorse and contrition by accepting the first syllable that dropped from Mrs. Flower's lips as proof sufficient. Thus, there was nothing to detain Count Julian. Grateful as Mr. Asheton showed himself, altered as he was, so as to excite the pity of Marion's nearest relations, the count regarded him with scarcely-concealed contempt. He disdained him, as fire might disdain any impugning of her power over frozen snow. But the count was not to return straight

home ; the bearer of a letter from her father, in which he blended horror of her unnatural conduct with the pity and forgiveness of both a Christian pastor and father, he was to go to Beatrice, and convey her to her Italian relatives, until, penitent and entreating, she should desire to return to the arms of those who loved her still, when all should be forgiven and forgotten.

It may be questioned, after that busy, sleepless night, who felt most happy, as, the carriage at the door, nothing more was to be done but to bid the travellers "God speed."

Some said it was Rupert; others said Mrs. Flower looked most radiant, and was the loudest in her expressions of joy. But there is a strong suspicion that Prissy and Mr. Courtenay ran neck and neck for it.

CHAPTER XVI.

MARION FAINTS FOR THE LAST TIME.

It was the last day of May. Marion had been busy; she had never before been left entirely alone. Edward had returned to Eton, Sir Robert was gone, the Woodhead shut up. It is true she did not feel lonely, but she wondered, as she came from beneath the arched yew tree — a spot she visited as often as she went into the garden — what she should do next. She stands there by the lake, just shut out from the sight of all the never-satisfied inhabitants of it by a large arbutus bush. Four years have nearly gone, and the fifth is slowly

coming on, since her husband and children left Asheton Court.

When Mabel was born, six years before, Marion was a fair and beautiful matron—her step somewhat slow, her deportment that of blooming motherhood.

Fear, the realisation of those fears, began to reduce the bloom, to attenuate the rounded figure. But when her deepest grief came, like the withering frost upon autumn luxuriance, she faded and shrunk to the pale shadow of a Marion already dead in heart.

The change wrought by her sister's visit, and those varied events which had lately drawn her out of herself, vivified her heart once more. The healthy hue of life touched her cheeks with a delicate bloom, which only looked delicate because of the rich colour of her lips. Her eyes deepened in colour, from the radiance of a more contented spirit, were larger and more beautiful, while the elasticity of hope and health gave a spring to her step that reminded the spectator of the pretty girl

stepping from cliff to cliff as she called to the flocks of pigeons. The matronly air and foot-fall were gone. Girlish and slight as her grief had made her, so she remained, looking scarcely older than when, as Prissy's little guardian angel and champion, she intruded herself upon the sacred arena of Mr. Godfrey Asheton's thoughts in her behalf.

"I shall amuse myself by writing to Kythe to-night — though I have no news to tell her, I can at least remind her that June has come."

"Father," said Rupert, as, arrived in England, they were rapidly travelling towards the mother he longed to see, "how soon shall we reach home?"

Mr. Asheton had been endeavouring, all the journey through, to proffer some explanation to his children regarding this strange and sudden journey. He had but short space now.

"Rupert, do you remember your home, Asheton Court, your mother?"

"My mother is very fair, with hair like

Mabel's—eyes like mine. How soon shall I see my mother?"

"Is Asheton Court a palace, papa, of white marble, such as we shall be pleased to live in?" asked Issa.

"If we have a mamma," interupted Mabel, "will she love us? Why has she left us so long?"

"She did not leave us, Mabel; I left her. The fault lies with me. Listen, children. I have been unjust to your mother. On discovering this, I have hurried home, as quickly as consideration for your health would permit. That I originally ever left her, was owing to you, my children. When we first married, she was very young, almost a child, she had received no education. I considered her childish. I may have been—I was unjust. But her simplicity and ignorance did not prevent her from being a very fond mother. As you grew older, I perceived that she had more influence with you than I had. Moreover, our opinions did not agree regarding your education; I

wrung from her, most reluctantly, a consent that she would give you up into my entire charge for an indefinite period. But in my own mind, I concluded that time would be but a year. I anticipated that, at the end of a year, your mother and her influence would be wholly forgotten by you all. My anticipations were not verified in that time. You remembered and considered her as much as before. I concluded, against my secret warnings, to try another year. I loved you, my children." Rupert snatched his father's hand, and kissed it, while Mabel threw herself vehemently into his arms. "I must have loved you, for I sacrificed my home, my country, your mother, for you."

"Father, I will never forget that. I wish I had been less troublesome to you," Mr. Asheton put his hand tenderly on his son's head.

"I soon discovered, Rupert, that I was as much mistaken in my plans for your welfare, as I had thought your childish mother. I meant to return home. But a rumour reached

me ;—I need say no more than that I wronged your mother—deeply."

"Father, you could not have loved her."

"Yes, I did, Rupert. When I left our home, when I parted from her, my hair was as black as yours."

Rupert reverently smoothed the silvered curls of his father's hair over his fingers, Mabel helping him.

"But how did you know it, father?"

"One whom I trusted—whom I thought a friend—told me."

"Oh, sir, and you believed any one rather than our mother?"

"I did worse, Rupert. I never gave her the option of denying it."

The boy fell back into his seat, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"She will not love us. Our mother will be an angry woman. I shall never see the eyes that follow me in my dreams, she will not love the children of the man who doubted her. I would not."

"She will love us, she will love us, mamma, mamma," cried Mabel, her little face in a glow of happiness.

"Our mother must love us," said Issa; "we are her children, and have done her no wrong. I like the idea of having a mamma."

"Mother, my mother," whispered Rupert, as to himself.

"She will love you, Rupert. I wronged her once; never again can I doubt her affection. She is, she has always been, your fond, sorrowing mother."

"Is she pretty, papa; is she a mother of whom we shall be proud?" asked Issa.

"There was no one, when I left her, whom I ever thought fairer. But as I am changed, so may she be. Her trials have been sorer than mine."

"I think not, father," whispered Rupert, coaxingly. The sight of his father's emotion made him forget for a moment the thought that had brought such sudden tears to his eyes.

"I remember these gates. Father, tell me, surely this is home."

"It is." Agitated by the thoughts that crowded one upon another, Mr. Asheton's lips quivered, his eyes filled with tears. His father and mother came vividly to his mind; the old delight of his first feelings upon the birth of his own son — what had become of these? A pang came even then into his heart; he was not now to be, as heretofore, the first object, the only law-giver, to his children. Their mother would by right of her wrongs, if for no other reason, take the first, the higher place—he must be second. The sacrifice of the happiness of those four years had been made for nothing—and if she should be altered? If, associating only with her own family, uncontrolled by Asheton rules (say they were prejudices, still they were dear to him), she had become still more wedded to her own ideas, still further removed from the adoption of his, could he blame anyone but himself? No; he would have not only to bear

it, but to sanction her orders. Failing in his own plans, could he in justice withhold from her the trial of those she advocated? Impossible. And then, only now did he remember no word had been written to prepare her. It was Mr. Courtenay's wish.

"Take her by surprise, if you care to reward me for all I have done," he asked.

How would she receive him? She would be unlike the Marion of old, if she did not accept his penitence, and freely bestow his pardon. Yet it was somewhat bitter the draught he had to swallow. He must acknowledge himself wrong in everything, sinful in much —and this to the wife he had considered a child.

Then his home. Would it appear to be the same home in which he had so long dwelt with his parents? Would its state and order be unimpeachable?—his servants as Asheton servants always were?—or would all be altered? In that one moment Mr. Asheton felt the true value of a home. Was this to be evermore

a haven of rest and comfort to him, or was it to be, from alterations, encroachments, or neglect, a never-ceasing punishment for his desertion of it?

The loud exclamations of his children roused him.

As if he had never left it, in well-remembered beauty, unchanged but in the fresh verdure that makes up in England for the want of a more sunny sky, every scene rose to his view.

The avenue of chestnuts appeared more luxuriant—the fresh young leaves glittered in the evening sunset with the drops of a sudden rain-shower. As if he had been daily there to see that it was done, broad, smooth, weedless, was the winding road along which they drove with that exhilarating rapidity, to which only English post-boys can urge their well-trained steeds; the sound of the quick trotting of the horses' feet, rising clear as one note, startling the quiet hinds, with their young fawns by their side, from beneath the sheltering trees.

As they emerged from the avenue, the well-known, broad, undulating lawn, almost more velvety, more smooth than he ever remembered it, rose before their sight, shaded and lighted as the grand old oaks, standing stately and alone, permitted the sun to pour its whole evening glory through them. And there in full, peaceful, symmetrical grandeur rose the beautiful home he had left. Not a sign of disorder, not a twig on the ground, not a leaf out of place—it was as if put in holiday trim by the agency of fingers scarcely mortal. A murmur of gratified pride burst from his lips, as he said:—

"Your home, my children."

In another moment they swept up to the Hall door. As of old, ere the bell had ceased ringing, the door was widely opened; as had been the custom, the two footmen, in their blue and silver liveries and well powdered hair, advanced, the one to open the carriage-door, the other with his arm bent ready to hand them out; Mr. Payne, the

butler, standing ready on the threshold step to welcome them in. It is true, he gave a hurried electrified start, and appeared about to descend lower than his dignity warranted; but the sight of Mr. Asheton acted as a charm. Without hurry, confusion, or further surprise, just as if they had been expected, Mr. Asheton and his children were ushered into their home; as Payne threw open the door of the great drawing-room with proper dignity, he bowed low, saying, with deference and respect:

"Welcome home, sir; welcome home, Master Asheton and young ladies."

His words were precise, his face stolid, but tears rained down it. He could not have uttered another sound to be made Mr. Asheton himself, or repressed that sudden shower of tears, were a kingdom the price.

Godfrey supported himself against the white marble mantel-piece; the carved angels that bore it up on either side seemed to lift their cold pale faces in pity upon him for four years lost and misspent, since he had seen

them. As one after another each familiar object presented itself to his view, unaltered, as if he had scarcely been absent a day, a flood of remembrances overpowered him. Awed and bewildered, the children gazed upon him in silence.

Any moment the door might open, and standing before him he would see the being he had vowed to love and cherish; whom he did—had always loved—but had sacrificed to his caprice. How to meet her?—as a lord and master still to rule absolute—as a tender husband, after a long enforced absence—as a lover, fond, devoted?

The first he could not be.

The second he was hardly able to assume.

The third—was it possible he felt thus strongly, and yet would it not appear a mockery to her?

"Father," asked Rupert, softly touching his arm; where is my mother?"

"We will ask," murmured Mr. Asheton, hoarsely.

Rupert rang the bell. Payne appeared at once, both eyes and nose reddened as if there were sharp frost on the other side of the door. Mr. Asheton could not command his voice to ask the question he wished, but Payne appeared to understand him without.

"The young madam," said he, glancing at the clock, "will be at the lake in less than five minutes. She will be here, sir, almost as soon as I can send."

"Father, father, let me go to her; tell me the way—show me the path—I must go," exclaimed Rupert, impetuously.

Again the immovable face of the butler became the channel of another shower of tears, while, unable to speak, he pointed mechanically to the two footmen, bringing in trays of cake and wine.

"We will all go," said Mr. Asheton.

"You must, sir, Mr. Asheton"—this had reference to a glass of wine, poured out by Payne, and thrust respectfully, but peremp-

torily, upon Mr. Asheton: he swallowed it—his lips were white. He looked at his faithful old servant mutely. He understood the question Mr. Asheton had not voice to ask.

"By the cedar walk, sir, through the garden. A little gate, Master Asheton, leads through a small wood to the lake."

"Thank you;—you're a good old fellow, shake hands."

"Dinner at seven, Mr. Asheton," he just managed to say, in a voice that appeared to come out of a wet sponge.

Mr. Asheton bowed an assent. Rupert was already gone. But he turned back more than once to assure himself that his impatient steps had not borne him in a wrong direction. Then, arriving at the wicket-gate, and seeing the lake gleaming through the trees, he bounded on, and disappeared from their sight.

"Will mamma love me," whispered Mabel, her little heart beating.

"Of course," answered Issa, aloud; "why should she not?"

No more was said. In a minute Rupert was seen returning.

"Father, there is a young lady standing there, just by the arbutus bush, dressed in black. May I ask her if she has seen my mother near here?"

Mr. Asheton was about to answer, when the sudden rush of water from all parts of the lake filled the quiet air with innumerable sounds. Above their heads rose the soft gurgle of the ringdoves, and the chirping of smaller birds, blending with the loud cackle of the ducks, and the trumpet note of Canadian geese. But above all, clear and sweet, was the sound of a woman's voice calling the birds to her. As they looked through the trees, they all saw the lady of whom Rupert must have spoken; she was scattering food to her feathered *protégés;* but on her shoulders, on her broad white hat, on her hands, nestled the doves, and the song birds of every sort.

Mr. Asheton held his children back. Very pretty was it to see her graceful dalliance with these feathered favourites. But it was not for long. Emptying her basket among them, and casting up her arms, suddenly she appeared to bid them leave her and eat. In a moment the air, so lately sounding with many notes, was silent.

"Now, father?" He ran without waiting for the assent.

"Madam," they heard him asking her, "have you seen Mrs. Asheton?"

She looked at the boy, saying, in a voice that made Mr. Asheton's heart beat:—

"Who wants her? She does not see strangers."

"I want her, madam, and my father: we are not strangers."

Godfrey could see the colour rising in her face—he could see her hand move as if feeling for a support.

"Oh, madam, speak—if you only knew how I want Mrs. Asheton!"

The conviction that it was her child who addressed her soon dawned upon her mind. The basket dropped from her other hand, her eyes grew larger, wondering, yet fearful; she touched the boy, his hands, his cheeks, as if she doubted that he was a living, breathing object before her. She parted the hair from his brow, looking down into eyes she saw were the image of his own. The boy trembled beneath the light touch of her fingers, and the tears filled his eyes, as he said:—

"Lady, I want my mother."

"Mother," echoed the sweet lips, with a low sighing sound; "he wants his mother, and I want my boy, my Rupert."

Mr. Asheton caught her, as she fell, white and insensible.

"Water, water—oh, bring water!" exclaimed Godfrey in agony. Unfastening the large straw hat, he lifted from the fair brow those lovely, never-forgotten curls.

Rupert dipped his handkerchief in the lake.

Many sighs came from the fluttering heart as the water was sprinkled on her face.

"But, my mother, sir?" said Rupert.

"This is your mother; this is my Marion —my wife. Oh! look up, love—speak to me, pity me, pardon me."

Kissing her curls, her hands and face, with passionate kisses, Godfrey Asheton forgot himself, and all around him but the form he held in his arms.

Filling his hat hastily with water, Rupert placed it by his father. Then, taking the hands of his sisters, he drew them aside.

"When she recovers, she must see no one but our father. He will have something to say to her we ought not to hear. See, I believe this is the very yew-tree of which old Courtenay told me something. Within it, he said, we should see if our mother loved us. Let us look within, sisters; we can hear if we are called, and we shall yet be out of the way."

In a sort of silent awe, they passed within

the yew-tree, Rupert giving one glance back at his mother.

The path led to a small round enclosure, encircled first by a closely-clipped hedge of the common larch, just now dressed in the freshest green. At certain distances, also in a circle, were placed pyramids of rose-trees beginning to bud.

Within this last circle appeared to be the pattern of something strange, closely clipped, low on the ground.

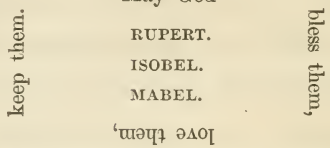
As Rupert studied it, he smiled in gladness.

"See, sisters, this is our mother's garden. Here she sits every day; and do you not see what is growing there out of the ground? Stand on the seat, Mabel, and you will see better."

"There is my name," cried the little one, "my very own name, planted in the garden."

"And mine and Rupert's," exclaimed Issa; "but what is this?"

These are the words that the children discovered growing in their mother's garden—



"But was that really our mother?" said Issa. "She looked so young—so pretty."

"Our father must know. Oh! mother, mother, make haste, and kiss me. I shall not think it is you, until I hear you say Rupert, my Rupert, once more. But I know it is my mother, I remember her. She is not altered, she is as we left her."

As this scene was passing between the children, their father watched consciousness gradually returning to Marion's heart.

Tears, drawn by acute sensitiveness, forced themselves from between her closed eyelids. A few sobs, and the words, "my children," could just be heard.

"They are here—near you—within call, Marion."

She strove to put her feeble hands together.

"Oh, God, I thank thee!" she murmured.

"Can you forgive me, Marion—my wife? Will you hear my pleading—my justification?"

Her eyes unclosed, and looked upon him as he bent over her in deep anxiety. Like clouds in the summer sky, various feelings flitted over her face.

"My children," she asked clearly.

"Shall never again be parted from you, but at your own wish."

This time the hands were closely clasped together, the eyelids drooped, the lips moved, Godfrey felt she must thank God once more ere she thought of him.

Sunny was their light when she again opened her eyes; her lips were resuming their usual colour. She was strong enough to rise from his arms.

"Thank you, I am well now; it is the sudden shock. Where are they?"

"I will call them soon, dearest; but, I

beseech you, hear me first. I want your pardon; I was deceived."

"Nay, say no more, you were deceived; now you know the truth. That is enough."

"But your forgiveness, Marion."

"Take it. Let me see my children."

Godfrey was troubled. Was this real magnanimity, that accorded his pardon ere she heard the sin? Or was it childishness, that cared not, so she had her own way? Or, was it—indifference?

As if guessing his thought, Marion said :—

"If you have been unjust to me, you suffer more than I do. Why pain you by confessing that which would wound me to hear. If my forgiveness is necessary, it is wholly yours. Let me kiss my children." Godfrey felt something like a shiver at his heart. Where was the tender, the loving Marion? He had thought to receive and give the tokens of love and reconciliation. But she had already withdrawn from his grasp, and had risen, steadying her yet trembling frame by the branches

of the arbutus tree. As she stood up, the air again resounded with the noise of the water-fowl.

"Take me to them," she pleaded.

With a strange joy, inexplicable to himself, he again threw his arms round her, and supported her to the yew-tree, where Rupert stood eagerly waiting; but it was even with a jealous pang he perceived she was still the fond Marion, the loving, idolising mother.

Exquisite was the picture of that happy restoration. The mutual exchange of never-ending kisses—the fond epithets—the loving touches—the tender gazing—the mother's movements, so beautiful, so natural—the children's, so touching, so innocent—their open comments of admiration, causing soft blushes to arise in her face, half shame, half pleasure. Many years had Godfrey Asheton been in search of the beautiful in both Art and Nature. Here, in his half-despised wife, in his own home, he witnessed a sight that nothing in Italy could equal in beauty—nothing in Art had ever surpassed.

CHAPTER XVII.

SIR ROBERT FANE MAKES HIS LAST BETTING BOOK.

"HEAVEN and earth! what is this? Do I dream? Am I mad? What shall I do? What a thorough villain, ass, knave, I have been in the whole of this business! Let me read again—

"'MY DEAR ROBERT,

"'I understand from Miss Flower that a gentleman, employed, I suppose by my brother (very properly, too), to investigate that very odd story you and she told Godfrey of his wife, has been to see you, as well as myself. Of course I gave him every information I could, and lamented with him upon

the sad way in which my poor brother had been duped. If you remember, he would take no advice from any of us. However, the visit of this Mr. Courtenay will have prepared you to learn that my brother, satisfied by his report, has returned home, and is, I am thankful to say, once more in his proper sphere. I have not heard from him yet (though I have written to congratulate him), for of course he must have much to engage his attention. We were not absent from home above two years and a half, yet I can assure you everything was in the greatest disorder. I have delayed offering assistance to my brother in the task of restoring Asheton Court once more to what it used to be, because, in truth, Trevor and I have scarcely a moment to ourselves. The vast responsibilities devolved upon us by the charge of our young heiresses, oblige us to be selfish.'"

Here two columns of Mrs. Trevor's letter were occupied by a dissertation on what was due to these amiable young creatures, which,

read by a stranger, might have been considered as descriptive of some wonderful young princesses.

"'Finally:

"'However, no more on this interesting, absorbing topic. As the husband of my valued lost sister, I have considered it right to let you know of my brother's return, and aware that your unfortunate share in that business must now be clear to him, it would be well for you to keep out of his way. As one of his dearest relations, I must decline having any further intercourse with you until I learn from my brother what his wishes are. Should he decide that you are not to be regarded further by our family, pray accept my adieus at once. On the contrary, if he thinks it well that 'bygones should be bygones,' I will take care that, when we meet, nothing on my part shall remind you of the disagreeable past.

"'Yours, &c., &c.,

"'Ellinor Trevor.

"'P.S.—As of course your son will be re-

turned on your hands, I am justified, I think (being my only sister's only son), in offering him a home and a mother's care, whenever you may find it expedient, on the distinct understanding that he is not to associate with my daughters. Their trustees might blame me for any indiscriminate introductions.'"

Mrs. Trevor unconsciously overshot her mark, which, it is presumed, was to frighten Sir Robert out of the way of any real explanation. Though smitten with remorse, he would not have withdrawn himself from Mr. Asheton's reach through fear. He would have waited his summons, if he intended sending one; and to do him justice, man of the world as he was, he began to feel happier than he had been for months. The disgrace of a lie was not exactly removed from him, but, at all events, the mischief he had created was repaired, or in the way of being so. He had begun to hate Marion for being well and contented. He preferred her other unhappy state much more

—because that touched him. A moment of remorse and goodness, and he might have repented, and atoned to her. The blooming, active Marion grated against him in every way.

But Mrs. Trevor's letter. He wished every single word within it had been as alive in flesh and blood as it was in sting, that he might have scorched, tormented, branded, annihilated it.

More in a sort of mad attempt to disappoint or crush her than in the healthy penitence that would have better become him, he sat down, yet smarting, and wrote a full confession of the whole transaction to his brother-in-law. He exaggerated the facts, he coloured their deeds, he damned himself, for little other purpose than to drag Mrs. Trevor down into the pit of abomination with himself. He cared not how deep he fell, provided she was smothered in it; and he sent a messenger off with the letter on his best horse, with orders to catch the post or never enter his presence again.

In about an hour the horse returned riderless, reeking and panting, the letter carefully buttoned up in the pocket of the saddle. The horse was not yet born that could go seven miles in ten minutes.

There was fate in all this, as Sir Robert acknowledged to himself in the morning. The writing of the letter had cooled his rage, yet not deadened the satisfaction he felt at confessing his iniquity. To wage war against a woman was unmanly, and such a woman, was degrading. He would write to Godfrey; but the revenge he promised himself for Mrs. Trevor's letter should be of another sort. He hoped to live to make her feel what the real meaning of an indiscriminate introduction might be.

Straightforward, sincere, energetic (because he felt a glow of good yet left in him), Sir Robert wrote a letter to Mr. Asheton, of which he was not ashamed when it was finished.

He asked for no forgiveness—he had not

the right to do so. Plainly he set forth his temptation, alluding (only because it was necessary for the deciphering of his tale) to the presumption that Mr. Asheton cared more to keep his children to himself than to return to his wife.

If reply were vouchsafed to him, he would wait Mr. Asheton's will; there might be some wish regarding his son. As anxious that this letter should go as the first, Sir Robert himself bore it to the post, and heaved a sigh of satisfaction when it was really beyond his recall. But as all excited feelings have their reaction, and in human nature it is scarce possible to be good all at once, he relapsed into a desponding condition. The possibility that his brother-in-law might think it necessary to exact from him the ordeal honour is supposed to demand, crossed his mind, and while without fear for himself, he regarded with horror even the mock raising of his hand against one he had injured.

Again, he thought of his son; of late, he

had become proud of him; at the age when he most required it, he was to be removed from the influence that had made him what he was.

The punishment was fit. The injurer must feel in the very point wherein the injured had been wrung; and in lamenting the loss of such a home and mother for his son, Sir Robert remembered with humility the mourner sitting by the sea-shore weeping for her children.

His letter was answered by return of post.

"DEAR FANE,

"I have no one to blame but myself. For your son, he has settled the score I might have had against you, leaving me, I fear, his debtor. At present, you and I are better apart; when we meet, let it be without the remembrance of the last four years.

"Yours,

"GODFREY ASHETON."

Under the first feeling of relief that this

letter gave him, Sir Robert wrote off to his friend, who had interest with the Secretary of the Colonies, and applied for that particular situation, whilom so obnoxious to his social and convivial feelings. In doing this, he considered it but a proper sacrifice to make to Marion. He did not expect any immediate banishment. People were not likely to vacate a desirable situation merely to please him, and he was not absolutely justified in going to one utterly disagreeable.

He did, what we have seen him do before, counted up his losses and gains; and he could not but own himself that it was a peculiar and significant fact, he was, within one hundred pounds, neither richer nor poorer than he was at the moment he listened to the suggestions of his evil spirit and Miss Flower, and Mr. Asheton's tantrums carry him off from truth and common sense.

"Very little reason will my boy have to thank me; he will inherit a title, and have to break stones on the road for a living perhaps.

If it is only for his sake I must work. I am now in what men call their prime. Let me see if a straightforward, honest mode of making money will bring better results than my past life. I am sick of it; indeed, anxiety ages one. Really, if I am banished to the dullest, hottest, dryest hole in Africa, I will make myself happy, thinking of dear little Marion—provided also I have a good salary."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. ASHETON WISHES THAT HE WAS OF ANY OTHER RACE THAN THAT OF ASHETON.

Sir Robert Fane's state of mind was not to be envied—Mr. Asheton's was still less so. For the first few days after his return home, he generously left the mother and children entirely to themselves. In no instance did he interpose his will or presence. Anxious as he might be, as he was, that Marion should remember she was a wife as well as a mother, he studiously occupied himself with Mr. Hearn, going round his estates, and visiting his tenantry, after his long absence; not even seeing his children, so long the sole object of

his care, but once a day. It perhaps had been well for him if some cause of complaint, some neglect or wrong to be set right, some mistake, had occurred in the management of his affairs during his long absence. On the contrary, had he superintended them himself, nothing could have been more satisfactory. As he walked through the village, he was gratified with the taste and effect of the improvements, still more so, when, presuming upon the urbanity he showed, which was not characteristic of the Ashetons, himself the least of all, the villagers congregated round him with congratulations.

"Our young madam is happy—God bless you, sir. She mourns no longer; that was all as we prayed for, sir—that she might have her pretty babes back. We wish you, and the dear madam, long life and happiness."

It was on these words, repeated now from house to house, from labourer to servant, servant to tenant, tenant to friend, that he

meditated on the day-week of his return home. Long life and happiness! Surely it could not be that she had ceased to love him?

On the first morning after his return home, he had gone eagerly forward to greet her, taking her fondly in his arms, saying:—

"Ah, Marion, I could have only spared you to our children; I waited, after you had taken them to bed, expecting you to return—I had so much to say."

"They did not like me to leave them," she answered, hurriedly.

But the next morning she was even more cold. She did not appear to see that he was about to greet her as before; she evaded his kiss. The thought harassed him. He would watch the next morning. It was true, she presented but her hand, as if that was now a matter of course. Their limit of intimacy was to be bounded by a cold touch of the fingers. Yet she could love, she had loved.

He would be generous. She should hear, see, and love nothing but her children. He would wait patiently, until his very patience would reprove her. So he withdrew more and more—he had even his meals solitary and apart.

But on this day he had heard how she employed the large sum he had meant for her sole use. There was some deeper meaning in her conduct than a reluctance to be separated even a moment from her children.

He must ask her—and it must be now. When seated at her own and the children's early dinner, she could not avoid hearing and answering his request for an interview after the meal was over.

"Rupert, come," she said, coaxingly, to her boy, as she followed Mr. Asheton into his study, he not losing sight of her until he could claim her promise.

"Yes, I will come; I want to thank you, father, for being so kind to us. Though I have been so happy with my mother, and

am never tired of going about, trying to recall everything, I have missed you very much, father."

Godfrey looked at Marion; she had turned away; he would have given up scores of his prejudices at her bidding, could he but have known that it was shame—shame—that her boy, and not herself, had thought of his neglect and loneliness, that tinged the tip of her ear so deep a die, the only part of her face he could see—he, once the Godfrey of her heart.

"Father, I cannot help running after my mother all day. Everything she does is so nice and mother-like, and so pretty! Don't get so red, mamma. Did you ever, father, see anyone so pretty as our mother, or so young?"

"Never, Rupert."

"She will be angry with me. Love your boy, mother. There is but one thing I wish to say—the very sight of this home does me good. I wish to be worthy of it. After all, father, this excellent thing is done by our

horrible life abroad. We should never have known the contrast. Accustomed to it, I might not have felt as now, that God, having given us this beautiful home, all these nice kind people, and such a father and mother, I ought—I must—I will strive to be a good and worthy man. Now, father, you shall wait no longer. I know you want our mother as much as we do," and ere Marion could stay him, he was gone.

"I do, indeed. Marion—my wife!—you have not forgiven me."

"I understand not what you mean—"

"Hush; belie not your frank nature, but tell me how I am to regain my place in your heart?"

"I know not; I have no forgivness—that is, I have forgiven you from my heart. All is dismissed from my mind."

"And can you mock me with such a reply? When I remember my Marion, the Marion of old, I want soft, gentle words coined afresh to express what she was. And now—"

"What is valueless is soon unlearnt."

"Valueless—Marion! you forget. Nothing ever was more true than my words. I would not seek the fulfilment of my wishes at the price of losing your affection."

"And I believed those words then, as I believe them now." She paused.

"Yet, Marion, you have a sore against me in your heart. When I thanked God, the first night of my arrival, that, without explanation, with a highmindedness that made me rejoice such a being belonged to me and my children, you accorded my pardon, I did not think it was to be after this fashion. I may be forgiven in words, but not in heart—I will not accept the one without the other."

"Sir, Mr. Asheton, it is not that—I—I regret nothing regarding our children. I am glad you fulfilled your wishes—it was so best. But—"

"Well, Marion?"

"But when I was about to be married to you, no reservation was made even in my

most secret thoughts, that but scant love should be yours, did you in ought give umbrage to that love. But you—you made provision against a tie that might be too stringent. You made yourself God, mocking His sacred ordinance. Had I known it at first, you should not have borne this sin upon your soul. Now, I have but one course. I am the mother of your children—but your wife—a wife to be pensioned off with two thousand a year, as the fit takes you—excuse me — I am not skilled in worldly sins — I know not how the world regards such arrangements, or why the sacred tie of wife is necessary for such hearts. I think differently. At the altar my husband became to me the better part of myself. As such, I gave him all I had to give, even my children. But he died suddenly to me one day, and I mourned him; even now I mourn, as his widow."

As Marion, with that sudden burst of feeling which in shyish natures often pours out

hidden fervours with irresistible utterance, gave voice to these words, Mr. Asheton listened as one suddenly stricken to marble.

His silence had perhaps given her speech. She feared a pause. But now she had said all; —true feeling is not to be measured by words. She had looked fearlessly at him; she was looking still. It is given to natures like Marion's to understand how to deal with a sudden shock.

"Mr. Asheton, I am a woman. I cannot help my womanly feelings, but, believe me, I will do my duty by you. Do not look so surprised, so shocked—I cannot help my heart; it is a very tender one. If bruised, there seems no healing for it; if broken, it must die. Not again will it bear to be used as something insignificant, unconsidered, when Asheton whims hold rule. Take heed to my words. Help the mother of your children to respect herself."

But the blow was too sudden. Her very words, stirring within him as much love and

admiration as anguish, made the task she gave him too severe.

Again she essayed her power of gentleness.

"We have a happy task before us—the education of our children."

"We—our," he exclaimed, in sudden bitterness; "use your own discretion, Mrs. Asheton—"

"Marion hopes, then, you will aid her," and she laid her hand upon his arm. No answer.

"Marion dares not undertake the task without your counsel." She took his hand. "Say 'Yes, Marion,' to make me happy."

"Yes, Marion." There was no denying her.

"Thank you;" and the earnestness with which she pronounced those two words told him he could confer no greater boon upon her.

CHAPTER XIX.

MR. AND MRS. ASHETON TRY TO OUTWIT EACH OTHER.

And now, having given a week to entire love and idleness, the Ashetons commenced their home life. If it was different (and in some respects painful) to what Mr. Asheton expected, there were yet many charms in it.

As the days went on, these charms increased. How, shall be explained as we pursue their history. While Mr. Asheton apparently conformed to the line Marion marked out as the barrier of their intercourse, in his secret heart he infringed it whenever the opportunity offered.

Eight or ten years ago he would have laughed

with scorn had he been told that he would sit, with beating heart, every morning, waiting for the ringing of a certain bell; that, as it ceased, he would listen for one footfall among many—one voice mixed with others. As his children entered with their mother, each and all to bestow their morning salutations on their father, though outwardly calm, there was an inward throb he could scarcely control; it was now, at this time, that the only token of a tie between him and his wife was manifested. How he felicitated himself upon the sudden determination that had made him, on the morning succeeding their conversation, kiss her, after he had kissed the children, taking her by surprise. For very shame, she could not refuse before them. And it was this kiss —this morning salutation — for which Mr. Asheton rose up so eagerly every day, and longed for evening and night, and the morning again, as soon as it was over.

Marion at last acquiesced with a good grace. Evasion, delay, indifference, had no

effect; Mr. Asheton would have his morning salute, even if she kept him waiting until evening; so she considered it best to make no more fuss. He considered this a point gained; he tried to remember her words, "Help the mother of your children to respect herself," according to her desire, but there was nothing to echo the thought in his heart. He had insulted her feelings as a wife; he must win her aggrieved heart back again as a lover. The husband should disappear altogether. He was obnoxious—a grievance—he should be dead.

He tried one other point, but there she gained the victory. She always called him Mr. Asheton.

"My name is Godfrey," said he, at last, to her.

"Ah, but your mother always called your father Mr. Asheton—I thought you would like it."

"No, I like Godfrey better."

But she did not heed the wish. He prom-

ised himself a revenge for this some fitting opportunity.

That Marion had some trouble with her children, especially the girls, need scarce be told. It was more, however, in the correction of bad habits than untoward dispositions. They certainly had haughty tempers and imperious whims, under which their servants suffered; but the love everyone seemed to bear towards their mother, whose gentlest reproof scarce rose above a whisper, taught them the surest way to rule. An aversion to fresh air, cold water, and all the tidinesses of an English toilet, was harder to overcome. But the pride with which their mother showed them to their father, in their pretty cotton frocks, straw hats, and shining curls, gave them a pleasure too.

Old fashioned, cumbrous, and unbecoming had been Mr. Asheton's notion of a child's dress. Heavy silks, rings, chains, lace, all the concomitants of which a lady's toilet is composed, was bought for these little children. In

cotton frocks, too, they could romp and play, in which (tell it low) they began to take a strange delight. Miss Issa was pleased to have a waxen baby on whom she could exercise all those little tempers in which she somewhat resembled her Aunt Trevor. While Mabel doted on her dolly, as much because it was her first treasure as because it was called "May."

They were clever enough—little prigs of knowledge—it was requisite they should be turned into children again, with regular food, early hours, and plenty of exercise to renovate their complexions, and restore the elasticity of their minds. They did some lessons during the day, under the joint superintendence of both father and mother. These were opportunities of which Mr. Asheton took every advantage; at the same time he had to be watchful—the "presumptuous lover" received one or two checks, given with a haughtiness few Ashetons had ever attained, and from which it took him infinite trouble to recover. But

having satisfied himself that life was valueless without the love he had in former years somewhat disdained, he felt he must nerve himself for a battle as of life. Moreover, the task was doing him good. In the first place, it excited him. All are the better for a little "stirring of the blood." Secondly, it took him out of himself. He could no longer think only of Ashetons, he was so occupied watching every look, conjecturing every thought, treasuring up every word of another. And what a vast fund of pleasure did he open for himself in this! How refreshing it was to study a character so true, so fine—whose essence was of God, whose humanity was so pure! He grew to like his children to be wayward, that he might hear the mother-words and soft suggestions that persuaded them to right again; or was it because she invoked his name so often, and lured them on through love of him? Then the dawning of a real faith within the heart, awakened by the study of the Bible at Carrara, expanded into a desire and thirst

for better things, that brought its own gifts of good things, plentiful to overflow.

"Mother," he overheard his fretful boy exclaim, "to think that I am to be shut up this lovely day, and only promised my ride if I do this task well. 'Tis too much."

"'Tis easy, Rupert; I could learn it."

"Yes; but I am treated like a baby. I would rather my father had said, 'Do this to please me,' than enforce my learning it, by saying I should lose my ride. And the coachman says Edward Fane rides so well. It sets me against the lesson."

"Then do it to please your father, and ride to-morrow."

"No, no, that is too much."

"Ah! well, perhaps so, to a selfish person. But if I had a father like yours, I should learn this lesson better than best. I should take it to him, saying, 'I learn this to please you. I will ride to-morrow.' I know what your father would do. He would never again say anything, but 'Do this, to please me.'"

"Mother, I will do it. I shall feel like a conqueror."

The Demoiselle Isobel, haughty as she was, descended to the meanness of a blow, when her ire was excited; and the stout cheek of her German attendant often bore the impress of her little fingers.

"Miss so wicked," sobbed the girl, one day running to Marion for protection; "me serve her no more."

"That I take care you shall not," retorted the young lady, following her in. "Mamma, pray pay her wages, and dismiss her at once."

"Go, my good girl," answered her mother, kindly laying her hand on her shoulder, "I will speak to you again by and bye. Meantime, if my daughter is not sorry for having so far forgotten herself, I am."

"Miss very wicked; sweet madam very kind; me have no friend in this crowded England."

"I am your friend; all my servants are my friends; do not fear."

"Mamma," exclaimed Issa, as the girl left the room smiling, "how could you touch her, or speak to her so kindly?"

"Because, my daughter having acted wrongly, it was necessary her mother should atone, until she sees her error herself and repents."

"It may have been unladylike in me to strike her, but she should remember I am Miss Asheton, and she only a servant."

"I wish Miss Asheton always herself remembered that she is Miss Asheton. I fear sometimes she forgets it."

"How, mamma?"

"My Miss Asheton, the one I love, would endeavour so to grace her station, that all the world could say she is indeed Miss Asheton; she acts in accordance with the high position which the Almighty has assigned her. But that other girl, who strikes her servants, and bids them submit because she is Miss Asheton,

is not worthy to be so. She is a little foolish thing, whom good folks pity, and wicked ones laugh at."

"Mamma, I wish to be your Miss Asheton; but pray forgive me for saying I am much superior to servants."

"In what, my Issa? You are silent. Are you faithful as Stephenson — trustworthy as Payne—patient as your own Gretchen? They are in lowly situations in the world; but if they do their duty faithfully in the eyes of God, they may be higher than you, who consider Miss Asheton exempt from all duty, merely because she happens accidentally to be Miss Asheton. Did you make yourself? By what title do you claim the right to do wrong, while everyone else around you must not waver in the least from your command?"

"Mamma, teach me to be the right Miss Asheton—one that shall be loved and respected as you are."

These were some among the many traits with which Marion proved to Godfrey that

her mother's instincts were superior to his paternal theories. As for Mabel, she bloomed like the roses, and was a perpetual little sunshine in herself. It seemed as if a fretful, sickly little changeling had accompanied Mr. Asheton abroad, and that he had found his own baby Mabel at home. And how precious were her little loving ways! How Mr. Asheton encouraged all those little imperious caresses that included father and mother almost in one kiss, taking them on her little soft lips, as often as she chose to give them, straight from her mother's.

She was too coaxing to be refused anything, yet too tender to bear even a grave look. She had no naughtinesses; she was so made up of love, she loved nothing but to gain love.

Whether Mr. Asheton had any ulterior motive in his plans, or not, was never known; but having gravely requested Marion to aid him in cultivating the acquaintance of their neighbours, they spent two or three afternoons

in each week visiting. If the distance was short, they were accompanied by Rupert; if longer, they went in the carriage, Isobel or Mabel, or both, being their companions.

Mr. Asheton derived so much pleasure now from merely looking at and watching his wife, that he rather encouraged the presence of the children. It removed her restraint, and he saw her as her nature and heart had made her.

But vast was the amazement of the county—too deep at first for utterance.

Mr. Asheton returned home—Mrs. Asheton become sane—Mr. Asheton quite sociable—Mrs. Asheton prettier than ever—Mr. Asheton acting and talking as if he thought himself no better than his neighbours—Mrs. Asheton lively, chatty, clever. What could it all mean? It meant something very pleasant, and none felt more happiness than the kind Duchess. It is as good as being a king to have a fine income, a good house, and a sociable heart. When such people settle

down in a country, they revivify and invigorate it with worthy, healthy pleasures. Their example is contagious, their manners enlivening, their habits regenerating. What could a king desire more? The Ashetons were about to begin to reign, for the first time in their haughty lives.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. ASHETON BEGINS HIS FIRST COURTING.

"MARION," said Mr. Asheton, returning from one of the long walks with which he often concluded the summer evening, "I have been hurt—much hurt."

He looked as if he were so.

There was no flying now to his arms for forgiveness of any untoward dereliction against Asheton rules. She calmly replied:—

"It can be remedied, I suppose."

"Yes," he answered, becoming subdued at the recollection of the contrast between the past and the present; "and I hope you will do so to oblige me."

"Certainly, if it is possible," replied she, with the voice and air that said, "Obliging you is no such matter of pleasure." And he understood them too.

"I inquired for whom they were preparing Maxwell's lodgings on the beach. I understand they are engaged for your sister, Lady Gordon. Marion, you have insulted me—still more the memory of my father and mother, who loved your sister's name for your sake. Lodgings! with Asheton Court at hand. A hired house for my sister Kythe, her brother's house so near! You have—and you use the right to place a gravestone 'twixt yourself and me, but your sister is my sister. I go north to-morrow to escort her here."

Marion did not appear much put out by this burst of indignation; but when he intimated his intention of going for her sister, much as she tried to subdue it, he saw the start and flush of pleasure.

The remembrance of them comforted him the next morning on this the first separation

from his children ; it soothed his parting from her—it shortened the journey down. But he was not wholly unselfish in this journey. If Lady Gordon was the sort of person he hoped to find her, what a powerful advocate she might become in his favour! Subdued by grief, she could the more feel for his state ; mourning her husband's loss, she could the better feel his undergoing a daily parting, as it were—a living death.

By having her all to himself at first, he could gain a certain interset in her heart, and there plead with never-ceasing plaints.

If Marion had her misgivings that such was his secret intention, and therefore prepared a double case of steel wherein to environ the heart about to be pierced by a hand smitten of God, and so not to be turned aside — she made her preparations for nothing.

Evidently liking and delighting in the company of her hitherto unknown brother-in-law, Kythe never mentioned his name to Marion of her own accord.

"Were you not surprised when you saw Mr. Asheton, Kythe?"

"Very much so, May; he is so much better looking than I expected."

"I mean at coming to fetch you," said Marion, blushing.

"Not at all; when I saw him, I knew he was just the sort of person to do such a deed."

"Do you think the children like him?"

"They have none of them, as yet, so refined and intellectual a countenance. He is a true gentleman, physically and morally. But what beautiful children they are, or rather will be, May, when they become more rosy. How thoroughly they enjoy having other children to play with them."

Lady Gordon had had her own way in one thing. She was in Maxwell's lodgings; but when she told part of her sad story to Mr. Asheton, had shown him her two children, touched with the mark of separation from their kind, at their birth, he acquiesced at once. The feeling that made her less able to separate

herself from the two stricken ones found a ready echo in his heart; therefore she remained with those two at the lodgings, gladly sending the elder ones, with their governess, to Asheton Court.

Never-ceasing were his brotherly attentions —his kindly thoughts; and if he had been bent upon discovering the truest way of wooing his Marion over again, he could not have devised a surer one. The first strawberries, the freshest flowers, the healthy treasures of the dairy, the delicate ones of the poultry-yard—whatever was rarest and best—found its way down to Maxwell's lodgings as a matter of course.

While a tiny donkey carriage, and many other little seasonable gifts calculated to amuse these "stricken ones," appeared from time to time, with little doubt as to who was the thoughtful donor.

About this time the Flowers came home—all three very different Flowers from what they were when they went away.

Mr. Flower no longer wrapt up his duties and himself in sermons; diminished already half a stone in weight, he was apparently preparing himself for some gymnastic feat, and desirous of reducing his portliness still more. For he was to be met at all hours, in all places, regardless of distance, heedless of weather, walking about his parish. If any nefarious, evil-minded, heartless, or incorrect matter was hatched in his district, by some marvellous intuition he got scent thereof—by equally marvellous activity he discovered it—and by sagacity, as unexpected as wonderful, defeated it.

There was no deceiving the parson now; and yet there was such kindliness in his manner, such an identifying of himself with the sinner, such a hearty cheering on towards the "narrow and perfect way that leadeth to eternal life," that it may be truly said Mr. Flower did not belie his race.

He was a soldier—girt about with the whole armour of God. He had on the breast-

plate of Righteousness, his feet shod with the Preparation of the Gospel, his shield, helmet, and sword always ready. Mr. Flower felt he had a great work to do. His talent had been long wrapt up in a napkin and laid by. His Lord might come suddenly, and find the interest not yet gathered.

Mrs. Flower was also changed. Her adventures in "Foreign Parts" had enlightened her heart as to the fact of millions of people being in a worse condition than the world she had lived in at Asheton. She became less loquacious, she had so much to think about, and she did not take, as heretofore, everything for granted. She had her misgivings that Constant's sermons could not reach the hearts of all his hearers, as had been her fond belief. A greater than her Constant must first bless the work ere he could hope his seed to bear fruit. Thus her life of happy security changed into one of more thoughtful prayer, and without losing his sunshiny Sophy, Mr. Flower obtained a more able helpmate.

But Prissy—poor Prissy—what can be said about Prissy? She had been warm-hearted, matter-of-fact, properly indignant on fitting occasions, easily duped on others. Sage, yet not considered wise; kind, but at times "vengeably savage;" acute, yet palpably innocent—all these things hath Prissy been in turns, during the proceedings of this veritable history. But now she was none of them; or if she showed any symptoms of her former dispositions, they displayed themselves quite in the wrong place. They appeared upside down —conspicuously inverted.

When wisdom prevailed in the social circle, she was silly and gigglish; when hilarity was reigning, she was morose and high—very high in her conduct. If her advice was asked, she ironically laughed at the idea; if it was not asked, she wept, saying no one loved or cared for her.

When it was fine, she wondered anyone wished to go out. When it was wet, she was surprised a sprinkling of damp could hinder people taking their proper exercise.

In fact, Prissy was a riddle to all her friends at present, save one, and that one, strange to say, was Mr. Asheton. He fancied he recognized symptoms of a disease not unfamiliar to him; so he took Prissy under his protection, and encouraged her, no matter what outrageous sentiment she might propound at the most unseasonable moment.

Mr. Courtenay was too busy with his new duties, in London, to be able to come and see "the happy family," as he styled them, at Asheton Court, just yet.

Meantime, about this period, Mr. Asheton had what he considered the exquisite happiness of perceiving that Marion had something to say to him. Enlightened by his constant study of her character, he knew that for three days running she had been attempting to prefer some request.

Would it not be but kind in him to assist her in her embarrassment? Not he; he hardened his heart, and steeled his nerves to the utmost. He could not sleep for thinking

of the delight it would give him to see her obliged to say, "Sir, Mr. Asheton, I wish one word with you," and of all he would say in return. But men are no match for the wits of women. On the fourth day, Rupert said:—

"My mother wishes to know where Edward Fane is to spend his holidays; they begin next Tuesday. Oh, father, let him come here, both because my mother loves him so much, and because I wish to know him."

Mr. Asheton had a mind to punish her for thus depriving him of his anticipated pleasure; so he said:—

"Edward is at Eton, and I hardly know if I like public schools as yet; tell your mother to come and talk it over with me, Rupert."

"Ah! then, all my anticipations are over; she won't come, because I was to observe particularly if you disliked it; if so, she would and forbid him."

"You think she will not come?"

"I am sure she will not, father; because she has been making up her mind to ask you,

and, fearing your refusal, requested me to do it."

"Then, Rupert, tell her from me, that if she had kindly asked me herself, she would have discovered that I am particularly anxious to have Edward here. If I like his appearance, manners, and acquirements, it is not impossible that I may wish to send you back with him, when old enough."

"Oh, father, thank you! My highest ambition is to be a regular schoolboy—to learn cricket, foot-ball, even marbles; a steeple-chase! Dearest father, I have read and thought over all these things until I was quite sick with fear lest I should never know them; and I am jealous of Edward—very. Now, father, note the next time my mother hears from him, and you will see how her eyes sparkle."

"Perhaps, my boy, they do so because she has worthily done her duty by the spoilt child of a dead mother. I can remember the Edward of whom you are jealous—a most utterly odious child."

"It may be so; but still I am jealous."

That evening Mr. Asheton announced that, on a fitting day, settled by Marion, during Edward's stay, he meant to give a strawberry-party to the small people of ——shire, together with their respective fathers and mothers.

"Being inexperienced in these matters, I shall want council, both from you and Kythe. We must have various games. I shall require music for a dance. We invite for two o'clock, and break up at ten. I mean to make this, my first *fête*, a well-remembered one, and would wish to present my little guests with presents. For that purpose, Marion, as soon as you have fixed the day, I shall go to town, and shall be happy to execute commissions for everyone. You do not object, I hope?"

Mr. Asheton indulged in a little quiet irony now and then, to make his Marion look at him.

CHAPTER XXI.

MARION IS HUNTED DOWN AND CAPTURED BY MRS. TREVOR; WHILE MR. ASHETON ENCROACHES UPON HIS PRIVILEGES OUTRAGEOUSLY.

Lady Gordon was Godfrey's best coadjutor regarding the arrangements for his party. Marion had entered into it, heart and soul, at first, delighted as a child at the delight of her children. But really Mr. Asheton appeared so wilfully ignorant, requiring her advice upon the merest trifles—unable even to write the invitations unless she came down to assist him, after the children were all gone to bed. Then, by degrees, instead of making out the lists, and finishing writing, addressing, and sealing them,

he would begin to talk of his foreign life and all he had seen, and that in so interesting a manner, that the clock actually struck midnight before she thought it could be ten. Blushing and scandalised, she whisked off in such a hurry, that she left him in the very middle of a sentence; which was rather mortifying for him, as he had meditated taking a comfortable sort of brotherly good-night, seeing her so conformable and pleasant.

The next evening, it was utterly impossible she could come, she had so much to do upstairs; so he foiled her with her own weapons, and for a few days only consulted Kythe. As for Prissy, after a slight brightening up upon hearing that elderly people, especially friends of the family, were heartily welcome, and that the party was not to consist only of children, she relapsed into her "foreign mood," as Marion called it. But she emerged again, temporarily affable and interested, when she heard Mr. Asheton was going to London the week before the party.

"Going to London. Ho, ha—going to London."

"Yes, Prissy, going to London, to buy presents, and games, and bonbons, and other good things."

"Not to invite any London people then?"

"No, certainly not; who would care to come from London to a childs' party in the gardens?"

"I am sure, I don't know why they shouldn't. London certainly might be a very nice place, but still a child's party at Asheton Court had never happened before. Mr. Asheton might just as well give some people the offer."

"I intend to do so, Prissy," remarked Mr. Asheton, overhearing her.

"Oh, thank — goodness, how hot it is."

"Do you like the heat, Prissy?" asked Kythe, surprised at the fervent beginning and cross ending of her speech.

"No, that I don't." Prissy was not clever

at disguising her feelings, at any time. Now, less than ever.

It was a lovely July evening. The air was full of odours, wafted about by a quick summer breeze that kept playing aloft amid the trees, while the earth was all still and calm. The sound rose and fell as if it came from heaven, and was louder and fainter as the clouds opened and shut one over the other; for not a leaf stirred below, not a blade of grass moved, but the murmuring amid the boughs of the trees was continuous. Soft, stirring sound, like the rustle of angels' wings, hovering invisible over the objects of their care and love, all other sounds being hushed in this the noontide of the summer.

They were all seated on the grass in the cedar-walk, Kythe and Marion with their work, Mr. Asheton with his book, and the children resting, like the bees and birds, in summer idleness.

Rupert was watching his mother's face, as now and then she rose and listened. At first it was with a jealous feeling, for Edward was

expected that evening. Suddenly he called out, "Ah, father, I have discovered your secret. I know now who is the original of 'The Listening Nymph,'—mother, mother, do you know there is a statue making of you at Carrara, that is to cost a thousand guineas, and my father designed it, and visited it, and thought of nothing else the last two months of our stay. It is so like."

If Rupert was in his father's other secret, namely, his design to win his mother's heart again, no plotter ever had better coadjutor. Godfrey caught the first glance of undisguised pleasure that his wife had yet deigned to bestow on him, though she afterwards tried to atone to herself by sending another after it, affectedly cold and indifferent. But that caused her to see the glow in Godfrey's eyes, which he permitted to shine out, full, refulgent, and which he bent upon her, manifestly unheeding speech. A rosy tint, in quick tide, like wave upon wave, overspread her face and neck as she saw it.

Endeavouring to look indignant, she started up, saying:—

"How quiet my little Mabel is. I thought she loved a race."

"A race, a race," said all the children; 'mamma, Aunt May shall be the hare."

"Come, papa, said the imperious baby Mabel, mightily in love; "come, if you catch mamma, you may kiss her, but you never will catch her."

Mr. Asheton's heart beat a little too quick for running at present. He seated himself by Kythe, saying he would be judge, and expect to be kissed by the winner, at all events, for his trouble. This being faithfully promised, the hare had two minutes law, and off they all went, the shouts of delight deadening all other sounds.

"Kythe, did you see her?" asked Godfrey, as they two were left alone.

"Yes, dear Godfrey, she was evidently pleased."

"Do you think I am gaining ground?"

"I do indeed; yesterday she said to me, 'I wish you would discover for me if Mr. Asheton gives this party because of what I once said to him, of our children mixing with others, or because he wishes it himself.' I said it was your own desire; and she answered, 'Ah! Kythe, what fine hearts are those, who, having erred, frankly retrace their steps.' I made for the first time some slight remark in your praise. She waited, as if for me to say more, then, in that little pettish way she has sometimes, she said, 'That is but meagre praise for Mr. Asheton.'"

"God love you, Kythe, for your kind sympathy. If I gain her love again, you shall have no cause to repent your share in the deed. How pretty she looks flying in and out of the trees. I think Maybird was correct when she said I should not catch her. How swift she is, and graceful! I wish you had seen my dear father's love for her. He alone properly appreciated her from the first. But she pauses—who are these?"

Suddenly, as Marion was threading the trees at her swiftest pace, young Osman Gordon very near her, she stopped, instantly falling into the paws of the two nearest hounds. Blushing, panting, laughing at the children's glee, Marion tried to smooth her disordered hair, for there before her, petrified into the wildest astonishment, stood Mrs. Trevor. Behind, as if she guarded them from an invasion of Goths, stood the Miss Trevors, and their amiable father brought up the rear.

"Is that Mrs. Asheton?" murmured she, slowly.

Godfrey loved his sister at that moment, for Marion appealed to him for help with her eyes.

"My dear sister, you have descended suddenly upon a home-loving party, enjoying this lovely summer evening. You have been fortunate enough to capture our best hare, the only person who has yet done so. Allow me to congratulate you, while I introduce you to

my sister, Lady Gordon. Children, go and amuse yourselves within earshot."

Anything so beautiful, at the same time so saintly, as Lady Gordon, rarely came in Mrs. Trevor's way. She was silent from involuntary admiration.

The colour rose to Kythe's pure white cheek, as she encountered this open, steady gaze, and to turn it she said:—

"We have been too noisy, otherwise we must have heard the wheels of your carriage."

"We did not expect you, sister," said Mr. Asheton.

"No, I hardly thought it necessary to write; I knew you would expect me as soon as it was in my power to come, and I considered that sufficient notice."

"For me it might be, Ellinor; but scarcely so to my wife. According to established rules, I believe, some deference is due to the mistress of the house. Your presence may be inconvenient to her," turning to Marion.

"My sister is welcome," answered Marion, proffering her cheek by way of proving her words.

She then warmly kissed Emma and Etta, bowing to their father, who having been assured, all the way on their journey, that Mrs. Asheton was nothing and nobody, and was about to be entirely extinguished by Mrs. Trevor, did not dare to hold out his hand until that worthy lady had given him permission.

Fortunately the omission was unnoticed, or perhaps noticed only to be a source of self-gratulation. Mr. Trevor held a position that very few people in this kindly world possess: he was not an object of interest to any single human being in the world—not even to his valet or himself. He was the husband of Mrs. Trevor, and the father of the young heiresses, and as it was necessary there should be some such person, dead or alive, he was the one. But it was the only individuality he had.

Rupert was despatched into the house, to

order the necessary accommodation to be prepared, Mrs. Trevor being so far bewildered by her welcome as to feel it hazardous to say she had already given her own orders. But for Lady Gordon, the party would have felt silent and awkward. Godfrey was recalling, with ominous frown, the last time he had seen his sister, while that sister was rallying her nerves as best she could. Marion was trying to break through the reserve of the Miss Trevors, while they anxiously regarded their mother, to know if they might speak.

It was to be an evening of arrivals.

Rupert came running back, shouting—

"Edward has come; Edward Fane has arrived."

"Good heavens! that dreadful boy, brother, Godfrey; do not let him come here until I have taken my daughters into the house."

She was too late. Bounding into the circle with no eyes, no thought, no heed for anyone but his Aunt May, appeared one of those fine blooming boys that at fourteen years of age

are pictures to behold. He was rather small for his age, and had delicate features, with fair curling hair; but being older than any of the children present, browned by the sun to the hue of a summer apple, his eyes dark and glowing with excitement, and fringed with long, curling black lashes, he looked a beautiful, gleeful schoolboy, utterly unlike the Edward of old.

"My dearest, dearest Aunt May, I have done all you bid me; I have gained more; and my tutor would not write by post, lest the letter should arrive before I did; he said I deserved to tell you the good news myself; but, oh, that I should think of myself first—you are happy again. God bless you, Uncle Asheton, for bringing my cousins home."

And dashing the sudden tears from his eyes, he took his uncle's hand as if to kiss it; but he tenderly pressed him in his arms, saying:—

"Welcome home, my dear boy, my Marion's eldest boy. Such shall you be to me."

"This is not Edward," exclaimed Mrs. Trevor, oracularly.

"Yes, Aunt Trevor; I know you very well, and my cousins, Emma and Etta. How naughty I used to be to you! Will you forgive me? I will do my best to make up."

They promised instant forgiveness, in high little keys; and then, after the manner of some little maidens more forward than others, straightway fell in love, the one with his eyes, and the other with his curls.

Rupert alone stood aloof.

Edward was again caressing the darling Aunt May.

"But which are my own cousins; those whom I am to love more than anything in the world, because they are yours, Aunt May?"

Marion called her three children. Baby Mabel kissed him at the first word, and was ready to do so again upon the slightest hint. The Demoiselle Issa held out her hand, which Master Fane, truly polite, but boyishly diverted, duly saluted.

But he and Rupert looked at each other after the manner of puppies, one of whom has strayed into the sacred path of the other.

"Rupert, pray love me," whispered Edward; "be my brother, that Aunt May's love may be mine still more."

Agreeing to such a compact, the smaller puppy extended his hand, and they two entered that evening into a bond of brotherhood —which, being founded on their mutual love for another, grew with the love and devotion they paid her, rivalling each other.

But now it was time to go within. Lady Gordon went home, escorted by Godfrey, as usual. Marion showed the still bewildered Mrs. Trevor to her apartment; she then superintended the school-room tea, at which she generally presided as partaker; but she considered, as they had company, it was proper she should appear at the late dinner. Leaving them all very happy, guarded by her sister's governess, she ran hastily upstairs to prepare her evening toilet.

Arrayed in her dressing-gown, all her fair hair let down to be re-adjusted, she heard a knock at the door. As none but females ever ventured up into that part of the house, she said at once, "Come in."

The door opened, and Mr. Asheton appeared on the threshold.

Astonished, Marion stood before him, silent.

Fearing a peremptory dismissal, and not venturing to look at her, he said hurriedly :—

"I intruded—I could not send you such a message by a servant, but I wished to ask you to be so kind as to dine with me this evening. Kythe recommended me to do so," continued he, venturing a few steps within, as if he feared he might be heard outside.

"I am preparing—I intended doing so," answered Marion, with a manner that would have turned a glowing coal into an icicle.

Seeing her "defending of herself," Mr. Asheton thought himself justified in giving her something to defend.

"So you have never changed your room, the one my dear mother described to me. And our daughters sleep here too. So near the leads—do you not feel it very hot this weather?"

"There are so many windows," stammered Marion.

"True," said he. "How often I have thought of this room, and pictured it to myself."

"The dressing-bell has rung sometime, Mr. Asheton."

"Has it?—then I will go. But you must let me come again and see it. I hear the view is lovely; besides, Marion, my children never before laid their heads upon their pillows without my seeing them, until I gave them back again to you."

"Pray don't let me prevent your doing it again, if such is your wish," said Marion, with a voice like cream just thundered into acidity. Mr. Asheton, warned, departed. He dressed himself in a hurry. He hated his

grand, stately apartment, orderly and spotless. He wished it was a long low room, full of odd things, littered with books, flowers, dresses, anything. And so absorbed was he, that he forgot all about his sister—and almost started as if she had been a ghost when he entered the drawing-room.

Mrs. Trevor was grown to that age when females enlarge. She had a double chin, her throat was somewhat like a pillar of fat, her complexion, never good, was now bad. She was elaborately dressed. Was she not the mother of heiresses? Still she did not look well by the side of Marion, whose slight form and girlish look were enhanced by the simplicity of her black dress.

The Miss Trevors were arrayed as became heiresses; much cut up into flounces, and greatly covered over with bows, especially on their heads, which appeared to be wholly composed of ribbons. Mr. Trevor, whose legs had become weaker, presented the melancholy appearance of a broken-down butler.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF MR. ASHETON'S STRAWBERRY PARTY.

Mrs. Trevor found it expedient to be delighted with everything at Asheton Court. So Mr. Trevor shook hands with any one who would allow him the chance. And the Miss Trevors began to forget they were heiresses, except when their mother was by, falling more deeply in love with Edward every day. As for Lady Gordon, Mrs. Trevor discovered, for the first time in her life, that Heaven had made a human being, in all respects superior to an Asheton. She was very sincere in her admiration of her; and as it is decreed by the Al-

mighty that we should mutually benefit each other, it appeared not improbable that Mrs. Trevor's mind might warp straight from one or two of its crooked turns, under her influence. She gave a very decided opinion as to the inexpediency of the strawberry party. But discovering that Lady Gordon approved of it, she swung round like a ship obeying its helm, and immediately consulted her as to the dresses proper for her girls, who, not yet out, but being heiresses, required, in her opinion, some requisite costume to distinguish their peculiar situation.

Meantime, if Mr. Asheton held a sort of court one morning (the one previous to going to London) for the purpose of learning every one's private commissions, he was disappointed in obtaining an interview with Marion. She sent her commissions, excellently described and written down, by Mabel.

So he set off, only comforted by one thing, which he owed to the presence of his sister.

Marion had to submit to a very tender leave-taking, which she bore with so bad a grace that Mrs. Trevor's eyes were opened. She scarcely knew whether she ought to be indignant at Marion's indifference, or gratified at her comporting herself so like an Asheton.

So she consulted Lady Gordon, who, having already fathomed the shallowness of her mind, declared they had no right to question the matter.

"Certainly, in that I perfectly agree with you; and if you had been my brother's wife, I should have said nothing. Marion is so childish; she looks more like a girl now than when I last saw her. I have never ceased regretting, since I had the happiness of knowing you, that you were not my brother's choice."

"I have the satisfaction of feeling that Godfrey has no such regret; he loves his Marion more fondly than ever."

"Yes, apparently he does, which is so strange to me, for she appears almost rude to him at times."

"He has much to make up to her—taking advantage of her youth and almost loneliness. None among her new family, except your father, appears to have known her true worth. I may speak of her as one not related to me, because we have, though sisters, known each other but lately."

"I grant there are one or two points in which Marion may resemble you."

"I would there were more, for my own sake. Look around the world, Mrs. Trevor, and see if, among all, you could find one, who, young, lovely, loving—a wife, a mother—would comport herself as my May has done, the four years she was left in a worse condition than widowed and childless. If I pride myself on one thing, it is that I am her sister."

Mrs. Trevor's heart was a very small one. It was so cased in with pride and prejudices, that there had never been given it a chance to expand.

But a crack was making in the wall—there appeared good hopes it would enlarge.

No longer sore upon being from her birth nothing particular in the family except what she made herself to be felt, Mrs. Trevor was softened. Fate had found her out and indemnified her; she had waited a long time, but still her position in the world was marked out at last—she was the mother of heiresses.

After this conversation, she kindly regarded Marion with favour, and simple strangers might have supposed she doted on her, and had always done so.

During this period, all unwotted by their mother, the heiresses had, for the first time in their lives, a quarrel. The budding ages of thirteen and fourteen were rather early for a tragedy of love and jealousy to be enacted between them. But so it was. In conjecturing who had sent for presents, and who had not, Etta propounded the expectation that Edward would send for one for her, which she should evermore regard as her dearest treasure.

Emma shrilly asked, "And why not one for

me?" Then ensued cruel recriminations, ending with floods of tears, the spring of which was suddenly dried up by the approach of their mamma.

On Mr. Asheton's return, the Court assumed an appearance entirely unknown in its history. It was like an enormous bee-hive, so excited was everybody. Mrs. Trevor began to regret her refusal to participate in the second great amusement of the day, after the strawberry campaign, namely, the drawing of prizes or presents.

"Oh, Aunt Trevor," exclaimed Mabel, clasping her hands in an ecstasy of feeling, "more and more presents are put in every hour, and the great basket is so full, papa has ordered another to be brought. I wonder how many there will be for you."

"None, my dear, I should think. Not exactly knowing if I should approve of such things, I declined giving or receiving."

"Oh, but I know there are parcels for you. Of course, Aunt Trevor, I put in something

for you myself; but I must not tell you what. You will have to guess, because that is to be our fun."

In this exciting time, Marion descended from her stilts almost entirely. Godfrey took care to be extremely respectful in manner, though he did not permit his eyes to be silent. He was anxious his *fête* should go off well, and he knew he should feel the wish to drown himself, if Marion chose to be offended at anything, and that sort of feeling was not compatible with being an amiable host. He settled the programme of the party with Kythe, ably assisted (as she thought) by Mrs. Trevor. But her notions of a child's party were much on a par with her idea of Mount Vesuvius doing the same thing, and kindly boiling the kettle for tea in its own crater.

When Godfrey submitted the plan to Marion, which, in the first place, consisted of the dinner at two o'clock, followed by strawberries and cream in the garden, she suggested that, instead of the presents being dis-

tributed out of the baskets, as all were standing round, they should be hung on the branches of the trees in the cedar walk, all marked with their proper names, the smaller children's below, the taller higher up. Thus the children could run about and seek for their own presents; and as there was a private list of them, Mr. Asheton would be able to see they were properly appropriated to the rightful owners.

This amendment was carried *nem. con.*, Lady Gordon, Mr. Asheton, and Stephenson undertaking to see it executed, if the weather was favourable.

No day ever broke more beautifully. Lady Gordon's mourning was too deep for her to appear at Asheton Court after two o'clock, though she was very busy before.

Two o'clock approached—the first carriage was descried—all appeared ready dressed. Master Asheton was highly delighted with a proper boy's jacket and trousers, and a faultless tie, borrowed from Edward for the day;

he had taken private opportunities of rolling on gravel and grass to take the shine off his new clothes, and the constant brushing that ensued assisted that amiable deception.

The Miss Ashetons had thick white frocks, high up to the throat, with little frills of lace round, and broad bands of insertion work to decorate them, white straw hats, and black ribbons, little grey boots.

The little Gordons were in deep mourning for their father.

The Miss Trevors had light-blue silk dresses, with five flounces, and little lace tippets. But they looked odd, for they had short sleeves, which did not accord with little white bonnets, decorated with forget-me-nots.

Though their quarrel was made up, they were not quite happy. Emma had asked Edward to dance with her, and, in school-boy fashion, he had graciously replied, "Oh, I will dance with both of you."

Thus Etta had the advantage of being able to say he had asked her.

Every carriage that drove up appeared to contain a more hilarious and delighted party than the last. Until all being assembled, the business of the day began, and went on prosperously without a check.

Mr. Asheton discovered this day that one of the surest methods of making yourself popular, is to give a child's party. He had no idea he was considered so delightful a person before, as he was led to conclude he was now. Favoured by the presence of so goodly a company, he took one advantage for himself out of his party. He made the most audacious open love to his wife that the usages of society would accord to an accepted lover—which, of course, in the innocent, unsuspecting eyes of the company present, only showed Mr. Asheton in a more favourable light than ever—that of an affectionate and attentive husband. Whereas if they could but have seen into Mrs. Marion's heart, how she pished, petted, fumed, at being compelled to submit to being set on high as an adored wife—a husband's idol.

Nos. 1 and 2 were there, our ancient friends, who, encountering Prissy, secretly determined upon discovering the real clue to all these wonderful things, but Prissy's state was this day that of sublime endurance.

"It is too hot for anything," says she, severely, intimating she was in no mood to have her time wasted in answering foolish questions.

"Too hot, Miss Priscilla, after Carrara?"

In former days, Prissy would have screamed upon being surprised. Now, having made up her mind that surprises were foolish things, she had given up being surprised at anything.

Nevertheless, though she said nothing, those that knew Prissy intimately would have seen she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

Nos. 1 and 2, seeing nothing in the last speaker but a weather-beaten, scarred-face elderly gentleman, took no further interest in him, for, being determined to see everything, and note down the smallest occurrence, they went from one group to another in the house,

from one corner of the garden to another, hoping they were at the bottom and top of everything. Whereas, they generally left a place just as some amusement was beginning, and arrived at another just as it ended. Such is the fate of half the fidgety pleasure-seeking world.

"Oh, Mr. Courtenay, what has happened?"

"Nothing, my dear Miss Priscilla; did you not know I was expected, even at the latest moment? I came in by the four o'clock train, and am in time for tea at all events."

"Oh, yes," said Prissy absently.

She was thinking how foolish it was of her not to see that she was perfectly tidy before she left the Woodhead; only she was comforted by knowing that May would have righted her instantly.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FINALE OF THE STRAWBERRY PARTY, AND THE EXTRAORDINARY EFFECT IT HAD UPON PRISSY.

CERTAINLY one of the most successful events of the day was that search after presents. The older and graver part of the company seated themselves in various groups among the trees, while the little ones, assisted by those who could still call themselves juvenile, sought for parcels. Very clever had been the hiders; still more clever felt the finders. Each parcel was brought to Mr. Asheton, and the direction seen; if the rightful owner found it, he or she opened it then and there—if not, it was again secreted.

But as for the shouts of delight, the exclamations of pleasure, the shrieks of surprise, never before had the time-honoured trees of Asheton Court heard such sounds.

Mrs. Trevor, as became her birth, maintained a sort of stately air; but when, as one present after another was brought to her, and she discovered that none had forgotten her in the family circle, she became remorseful, thanking the little donors three or four times over, and snubbing Mr. Trevor for not being sufficiently grateful. He, poor man, borne down with the weight of her presents and his own, became weaker than ever about the legs, besides being almost in tears for want of a flow of words to express his feelings.

To the elderly spectators, who did not receive presents, but whose children did, it afforded a most pleasing sight to see the Ashetons—those proud Ashetons—receiving and accepting little gifts with so much warmth and family love.

There was Mrs. Asheton received one,

which, by the blush that rose on her face, must have been of extraordinary value, yet *No.* 1 was but just in time to see it was a bracelet, blazing with diamonds. Mrs. Trevor, who had had it in her hand, could not understand it at all. A lion *couchant*, in dead gold—the crest of the Ashetons—a little Una seated upon it, throwing all over him a fine net-work, linked in every link with a diamond.

Perhaps Mrs. Trevor did not notice the engraving within, because it was then the blush rose so vividly to Marion's cheek. However, she was so overwhelmed with presents, that she had not time to bestow much attention upon any one in particular.

Edward was rather bored by Emma and Etta constantly asking him which was his present to them, for he avowed he had, of course, given them each one; and in the innocence of their inexperienced hearts, they guessed all to be his, until they arrived at the right conclusion.

"Which is your present to my brother, Marion? I see he has almost as many as yourself."

"Has he? I don't know exactly; indeed, I think I forgot to get him one."

Mrs. Trevor treasured this up for Lady Gordon's hearing.

As for Prissy, she was quite a new Prissy, burnished up with smiles and good-humour until she was refulgent with amiability.

In fact the party was a great success; and after everyone was gone, Mr. Asheton gravely thanked Marion for being the original means of giving him so much pleasure.

"My sister told me you gave it to please yourself."

"But you remember what you used to tell me a long time ago, about our children mixing with the world. My experiment having failed, I had a wish to try yours. You have the result in my thanks."

It was impossible for anyone so keen-eyed as Mr. Courtenay not to perceive that the

"happy family" were not quite so happy as they ought to be. Animated and agreeable as Mr. Asheton was in company, when out of it, or rather, as Mr. Courtenay discovered, when Marion was not present, he was nearly as absent and unhappy as at Carrara.

The shy yet ward-and-watch hauteur, that appeared to possess the gentle Marion, soft and gay with all but Mr. Asheton, opened his eyes.

"After all," cogitated he to himself, "the Almighty permits us to see nothing perfect on this earth. That anything like a vindictive spirit should exist in so feminine a mould surprises me. Besides, it belies her character. My friend Asheton is redeeming his in my eyes. I shall assist him, though I am sad, very sad, that she should have fallen from her high estate in my estimation—I had thought her more forgiving. In fact, I did not think her a woman. I'll go and consult Mr. Flower."

The result of their conference was a visit

to Lady Gordon. Marion was restored to her original high pedestal in Mr. Courtenay's favour, upon hearing that her estrangement from her husband arose from nothing regarding the children, but dated from an act even before his marriage.

Mr. Flower had again to deplore his supineness.

"Had I made the least remonstrance, I feel certain old Mr. Asheton would have seen the iniquity of such a clause in the settlements. I must now appeal to my niece."

"Not so," answered Lady Gordon, "Marion's heart is so true in its affections she will do nothing from compulsion. Godfrey alone has it in his power to make her believe he loves her; and I feel persuaded he will succeed."

"Yes, if his health does not fail," remarked Mr. Courtenay. "Even in my short knowledge of him, he has aged wonderfully. Nothing hurts the constitution like a troubled mind."

"I am sure she will see that as soon as any of us," answered Lady Gordon.

"Are you sure that silly woman, Mrs. Trevor, has not something to do with it—my mind misgives me whenever I look at that woman."

"No, no, Mr. Courtenay, think better of Marion than that."

"I shall draw up a sort of account of all I discovered when I was last in England, and of the three visits I paid—one to Mrs. Trevor, one to Sir Robert Fane, and one to Miss Flower. You also, my dear sir, can add your testimony of what you overheard. Joined to this, I shall describe Mr. Asheton's demeanour, his refusal to hear all this, his joy at the first word, and his instant belief—and the deuce is in it, if, when she reads it—which I shall take care she does—she does not relent."

"I see no objection to this, Mr. Courtenay. You can give her the packet as if it was of no particular consequence; but that there was some little account of affairs abroad, she

ought some day to know. But she must not mention the affair to Mr. Asheton; he might dislike her to know all he endured."

"Ha, ha! set a woman to catch a woman. When their pride is offended, they put me in mind of those baits for fish all over hooks, you cannot speak without being pricked. We must show clear water, otherwise she'll out with her hooks."

"This does not please me, Kythe; as her uncle and pastor, I ought to reason with her," said Mr. Flower.

"Let us try Mr. Courtenay's design first, then your remonstrances may fall upon a softened heart."

"I intend following Lady Gordon's advice to the very letter; meantime, I shall give Asheton a little help after my own fashion."

But cautious as Mr. Courtenay was that Marion should not suspect his design, he feared she did, by the indifference with which she listened to any remarks about Mr. Asheton's health. He scarcely ever ad-

dressed them directly to her, and made his observations in a careless, natural manner, well calculated to deceive. "But she is a regular vixen," said he to himself every night, as the only mode he had of expressing his vexation.

Meantime, it began to dawn upon him he had a little business of his own to do as well. It was impossible for the unsophisticated Prissy to hide her pleasure in his society. And while his weather-beaten countenance became bronzed with a richer tinge at the notion of any girl (for all ladies under thirty appeared to him as such) liking him sufficiently to marry him, it stood a chance of deepening to permanent copper-colour at the idea of having a domestic hearth at last.

He was now in a position to command one.

Prissy's good humour, sterling worth, and homely character struck him as peculiarly calculated to make him the exact wife he requïred. Her youth—for he considered her very young at twenty-seven—made up

for want of much beauty, her warm-heartedness for cleverness, and her high principles for wisdom. He felt sure the whole force of her affections would be settled on her home. And was not that just the sort of wife he required at his age? If Prissy lived with those she loved, it might not be inaptly said of her, "that town would be country to her, and country town, the desert a garden, the wilderness peopled;" she would see only with the eyes of those she loved.

But seventeen years difference in age was not to be rashly set aside. It behoved him to ask whether, in the new pleasure that was breaking into sunshine over his heart, its rays had not rather obscured his mental vision.

First of all, he consulted Mr. Asheton, his oldest friend. Indeed, it was to that old friend he owed the original perception of the idea, being too diffident himself. Mr. Asheton had told him how he wished him to be connected with him—one of themselves.

(Oh, ye realms of incomprehensible

matter, tell us from what thick and murky cloud you gathered this extraordinary fact, and put it into the brain of one of these haughty Ashetons, that he would be pleased to be united so intimately to a dealer, buyer, seller, agent for Carrara marble!)

This apostrophe is supposed to be what Mrs. Trevor would have said, had she heard her brother broach such an idea; but there are strong historical doubts of her ever having heard him. From Mr. Asheton he went to Lady Gordon. Her assent was not so cordial. She loved Prissy dearly, but she was not so certain that she would make a good wife, or rather, efficient housekeeper. Wishing for no corroboration on that matter —as few people do when they have made up their minds not only to marry, but whom to marry—Mr. Courtenay went to her father and mother.

Here, sad to say, he met still stronger opposition. But as this did not appear to arise from any personal objection to himself,

his age, or his fortune; having, moreover, experienced, during his eventful life, that the more desirable a thing is, the harder it is to get; and, finally, having equally experienced the good effects of a dogged determination, he did not make himself the least unhappy. He only decided he would have her, and to make that decision unalterable but by Prissy herself, he went straight away and asked her.

That Prissy should fall into a state unlike any other state that any one had ever seen her in before, was not wonderful, and the only thing that brought her to, was that unkind May saying so unfeelingly, "Love was a very stupid thing, and she advised her never to have anything to do with it." If Prissy had forgotten her own words, Mr. Asheton had not, nor the occasion. With glowing eyes he looked at Marion. Either purposely, or really indifferent, she was gaily laughing, never looking his way.

So, passing behind her unseen, he possessed

himself of one hand, whispering, "My May, are our children to learn such words from their mother, say?" And his breath stirred her thick curls.

"No," said Marion, blushing, yet honest in spite of herself. He drew her with one sudden clasp to his heart—so sudden that no one saw them, so rapid that he was gone ere she could turn either in anger or expostulation. It did not appear that Mr. or Mrs. Flower had any objection to Prissy's marrying, beyond the fact that they had no idea she ever would marry. Their beautiful Beatrice had never even had an offer, and she was thirty years old. Therefore it struck them that Prissy, not so favoured by nature, would never have an offer at all, or perhaps not until she was forty. Surprise, therefore, acted the unkind part in the wooing of Mr. Courtenay; but, as we have seen, he was not easily daunted, and, having secured Prissy's own consent, he suffered all the others to settle for themselves.

Meantime, Mrs. Trevor was not idle. Though the mother of heiresses, it yet became her to shine forth in other ways. She had not yet settled how she was to set about it. That the matrimonial relations between Mr. and Mrs. Asheton were not such as their friends could wish, was now patent to her mind.

Whether she should take part with her brother, and urge a separation and divorce under the new Act of Parliament, and get Lady Gordon, under another new impending act, to take the vacant place, she did not know. She imagined it would be difficult, but it was very desirable. Her brother evidently had the highest esteem for Lady Gordon; it might look odd, yet, as Asheton happiness was concerned, oddities must give way to expedience. But then Marion, what could she do? Certainly, Marion was very much improved; she admired her, she had acted well. Her present pride of stately womanhood was natural. In fact, Mrs. Trevor would have acted in just the same manner.

What should she do? It would be as well, perhaps, to write to Sir Robert Fane, and in visiting upon his head the unfortunate circumstances relating to the estrangement of Mr. and Mrs. Asheton, urge him as a gentleman, a man of honour, a Christian, to come forward and confess how culpable he had been, how villanous were his deeds.

"Villanous, Aunt Trevor!" exclaimed Edward, "I only told uncle Asheton it would be fine—we could ride."

"You were talking to yourself, Aunt Trevor, as you often do," interrupted the impatient Rupert. "Oh, father, we must ride."

"Let me hear Edward's reason for thinking it will be fine," answered his father.

"Those straight, streaky clouds, Uncle Asheton, are, as you know, *cirri*, and when placed up there, denote fair weather. If those *cumuli*, the round clouds, were above them, it would be wet. Now they are in their proper place, near the earth."

"Oh, father, I want to learn all these things," said Rupert.

"Aunt May knows everything of that sort."

"We will get her to teach us all," said Mr. Asheton. "Now for our ride."

CHAPTER XXIV.

IT BECOMES MARION'S TURN TO LET MRS. TREVOR SEE SHE IS NOBODY, WHICH SHE DOES WITHOUT SPEAKING A WORD.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed since the successful party. Mr. Courtenay's leave was nearly over, but he had succeeded in carrying out his determination. He was to be married to Miss Priscilla Flower in six weeks from that date. Mrs. Flower moped; she began to wonder how she was to live without Prissy. Never having calculated upon losing her, the approach of such a calamity came as a stunning blow.

Prissy comforted her, after a sort of Prissy fashion.

"You know, mamma, London is not so far off, and I have always wanted to live in London. I hate the country—the walks are not paved, and there's such a smell of flowers that way, and seaweed this way; and I always forget the day the butcher comes. Now, he says in our street the butcher is not two doors off—think how nice!"

That pronoun, "he," answered at present, in Prissy's eyes, for one person. Also it stood for both Christian and surname.

Mrs. Trevor was deep in some mystery; under cover of her present absence of mind, the young heiresses and their father showed a few natural traits in their character, unrebuked.

Kythe was low—her May was more stubborn than she deemed her nature could be. The many hopes she had given Godfrey began to fade even in the expectation of them.

Godfrey was undeniably sad. No hindrance was ever made to his entrance into that low upper chamber on the plea of seeing his children. Taking advantage thereof, he had

searched, if haply in some weak time, forgotten since, he could discover one object kept as a souvenir of himself. There was nothing. His portrait was open to all, on the drawing-room table. The presents he had made her aforetime were all there too, publicly displayed. To be sure, they were not the sort of presents, he felt now, a lover would have bestowed upon the one loved of his heart; vases, books, objects of *virtu*, meant as much to adorn his house as to please his wife, were the kind he had bestowed.

Yet her room was filled with the gifts of others. "I do not mean to relax, Kythe, though Courtenay thinks a little indifference might have a good effect. He does not know my Marion. Even the children begin to think their mother loves them too well, because she appears to love their father too little. Last night, Rupert, for he told me when I went to look at him ere I went to bed, spoke to her, and said—'Mother, if we have been the cause that you will not love our father, I wish I was dead.'

"'How know you that I do not love him, Rupert?' she asked.

"'Because, mother, our father is unhappy. He becomes more pale and thin everyday; and he looks at you, mother, when you do not observe, and I see all his heart in his eyes. Do not you know, as well as we do, that Ashetons can die, and say nothing if it touches their pride.'

"'I know Ashetons better than you, love; your father will not die.'

"'Then love him, mother, once again.'

"'What! Can you think you have so base a mother that she cannot love the father of her Rupert? Sleep, sleep, naughty boy, and think no more such vile calumnies,' And she put him off thus, Kythe."

"I augur well from that, Godfrey; had she really cared nothing, she would have answered more openly."

"Father, father," called Rupert, running in breathless to Maxwell's lodgings, "come quickly to the Court. My Uncle Fane arrived suddenly, and he told me to tell you Aunt

Trevor had sent for him, but he would see no one without your permission. He said he would not have come at all, but that he understood it was necessary. He is in the summer-house, and Edward is with him."

"Godfrey, this explains a late mystery in your sister's demeanour," said Lady Gordon. "I can assure you she has both love and admiration for Marion, but it is more natural she should have them for you. I think she has sent for Sir Robert Fane on purpose to expostulate with Marion; I fear this may not be judicious."

"Nothing less so. I will not have her troubled. They cannot understand her nature. Run back, Rupert, and say I am coming. You will perhaps return with me, Kythe, to shield her, as I must do."

Quickly as they followed, Rupert met them again.

"She is there; they are all there. Aunt Trevor watched his arrival, and brought my mother to him, all unknown to her. And it was

arranged before with Uncle Flower, Mr. Courtenay, and that good-for-nothing Prissy, smiling and smirking. Edward just ran out to tell me. Oh, father, let me, too, enter ; I wish to tell my mother that I also shall scarcely love her, if she does not love you."

"My boy, am I to owe your mother's love to compulsion? No ; it must be her free gift, or I will live without it."

Rupert snatched his father's hand, and put it to his lips for a moment.

As Godfrey and Kythe entered that often-mentioned summer-house where the stony huntress yet prepared her bow, and still looked eager for the chase, Mrs. Trevor was undisguisedly troubled; evidently she had composed a notable play, but all the actors were misplaced. Suddenly two persons appear who have no right on the stage at all.

As they entered, Marion was just uttering the words—

"I have read it all, Mr. Courtenay ; believe me not unjust."

Edward withdrew from his watch by his Aunt Marion's chair as he saw them, and joined Rupert outside.

Godfrey advanced towards Sir Robert Fane, and held out his hand.

"Indeed, will you indeed act thus by me?" he faltered.

"I know not," said Mr. Asheton, with that peculiar clearness of voice that bespeaks equal frankness of heart, "why you should think I would not. If, in a perverted state of mind and body, I believed that which was to my own disadvantage, I injured but myself. My wife, nobler-natured, escaped that self-upbraiding which is my lot. I quarrel not with what is just. May I ask why you are all here?"

Mrs. Trevor, reassured, explained that, having gained the presence of Sir Robert Fane through an appeal to his feelings, she thought he ought to establish a perfect understanding between man and wife, and she had assembled all the others to corroborate his words, in case Marion should cavil at his statements.

"Sister, I cannot thank you for your sympathy—it is most ill-judged. I have refrained from upbraiding you with the past, trusting that you would yourself see that your power with me is gone. By the memory of our father and mother—we are brother and sister—ask me not for more. Had I known this, I might have spared you all the trouble—my wife this ill-timed molestation. In justice to her, I must explain that I proved, even before I married her, that I was not worthy of her affection. In my marriage settlement, a clause was inserted at my express wish, against the advice of both my father and mother, providing a sum of two thousand a year, for the support and maintenance of my wife, in case I chose to leave her. Again, in justice to her, I protest to you all, that, on the very instant of restoring her children to her, my wife pardoned me for whatsoever I had made her suffer on their account. But—and who amongst you with wife or daughter can blame her?—she would

not live with me, subjected to the insult of this clause. The law gives me no power to undo my act. My own heart forbids me to blame my wife for a decision that demands admiration, increases my love, yet makes both an increasing torture to me. Let me beseech you, therefore, to leave her to the dictates of a heart we all know to be unmatched for tenderness—to a judgment that will be candid in spite of itself. That I have never yet availed myself of this unhappy clause, prompted by no better motive than a whim; that when it was brought forward, it was only an act of justice to her; and that I felt its evil nature so bitterly that the disgrace clings to me now, and makes me acknowledge here, before you all, that my punishment is but right; these are facts which in time will be considered by the mother of my children as a plea for the forgiveness of their father. I will wait until then."

Kythe looked up into Marion's face with that tender beseeching a mother might use to a wayward, passion-driven child. The only

response was a silent kiss; she then turned and looked at Mr. Asheton, who, interpreting the look, opened the door for her to pass out. As he closed it after her, Kythe said, softly :—

"Oh, Godfrey, I am disappointed in her."

"I am disgusted," said Mrs. Trevor, who must be angry with some one.

"I must needs exert my authority," murmured Mr. Flower.

"You expected too much, Kythe, and you, Ellinor, have no right to judge her, even if you could understand her character. Let me beg of you, my dear sir, to do nothing further in this matter. The word 'authority' can have nothing to do with her; she is under a control far higher than ours. Let me thank you all—at least those who had no restitution to make for thoughts and deeds which I, fortunately, have not the right to investigate. It is best known to them how much they owe me, and I am willing to consider the debt cancelled by their efforts now, even though they have been fruitless."

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. ASHETON SEES A GLEAM OF SUNSHINE IN HIS CLOUDY SKY.

As Mr. Asheton went silent and alone out of the summer-house, "Father," whispered Rupert, "she has gone there—oh! dearest father, she told me to tell you she was gone down there. She said no more."

Heartily embracing his son, with hope and elation springing from his heart to his face, Mr. Asheton changed his listless, slow step to one that almost bounded.

"There," he felt, meant but one spot. It was there they parted four years ago, where he told her that he should never love any

other woman. He was so rapid in his movement, that he caught a glimpse of her through the trees, and moderated his speed, so as to reach the spot at the same time as she herself.

She flushed violently as she saw him. He uttered no word, but drew her towards him, and she did not repel the embrace as heretofore.

"I—I would wish to be just. I know that in truth you never more thought of that thing, after you had ordered it to be drawn up—until—until, perhaps, you imagined I required it."

"You judge me rightly."

"And no law can alter it?"

"Even if it could, Marion, I would not wish but that my love for you should be the truest shield you had."

"Love is better than law, that I grant. It will not quibble or strain at flaws. I could not say, what I would have said, before all those people."

And blushes, like those of a maiden confessing her first love, stole over her face.

"And what would you have said, my May?"

He would have called her a thousand love-names, but he dared not yet.

"Nothing — nothing more — pray release me; but what all you said I acknowledge to be true. I felt what Kythe felt; but—but you do not know—you are not capable of loving. Had I gone, as you did, four years ago, I should have remembered whom I left behind, rather than those who were with me, and—"

"Returned in six weeks! Say, is it not this you would have done? Well, so would I, had not what I considered a sacred duty withheld me. Oh! May, within six weeks of leaving you, I had well nigh wished myself childless; and, feeling that it was likely this longing would grow stronger, I bound myself by a solemn oath to remain one year. Then shame withheld me; I could not return you

your children so unlike the children I took from you. But excuses do not become me, and are but insulting to you. It is enough that you know I have never had a happy moment without you."

Marion tried to hide her face; he strove to see it.

"I ask for nothing, but that you will call me Godfrey once more. I ask it, because my love has never erred against you—nothing but my judgment. Say Godfrey."

"What! love me still, when I was that which Beatrice said I was?"

"Yes, more fervently than ever. Call me Godfrey."

"Love me, yet not return to me?"

"'Tis true; yet I declare I loved and thought of nothing but you. I was willing at times to forego everything, so that I might hold you thus once more. Marion, if, in the first burst of agony at hearing of my mother's death and your presumed imprudence, I obeyed those instincts of family pride so

fostered and imbedded in Asheton natures, cannot your own true heart tell you that remorse has broken them up, root and branch? Now, let me hear my name once more spoken by your lips; 'tis but a small request."

"Yes; unlike Mr. Asheton—"

"That Mr. Asheton, your first husband, is dead. He was a sorry fellow; I intend making no further excuses for him; I never think of him without a shudder—don't you?"

"No," began Marion.

"No!—then you love him still, Marion?"

She was silent.

"I am not jealous of him; but I would rather be the dead Asheton, if you love his memory, than the living one. I cannot alter, Marion; your cold and haughty husband is gone. I can never promise to be otherwise than your lover, sworn to an everlasting reverence for your virtues—vowed to never-ceasing service for your love. Will you accept Godfrey, and love him?"

"This Godfrey must remember," whispered Marion, in fluttered words, "that to be accepted now might wear the appearance of a deference to the wish of others. The Godfrey I loved would wait—will wait—until—"

"Until," echoed Mr. Asheton, drawing back the curls from her face.

"Go on," she said.

"Marion herself says, Godfrey, I love you."

In his eagerness to look into her eyes, he half withdrew his clasp round her waist. She suddenly sprung from him, and fled.

He watched her disappearing; leaning against a tree, for his agitation was great, but his eyes were towards heaven, his lips moved. He was yet absorbed, when Kythe appeared in sight; he went to meet her.

"Was Marion flying from you, Godfrey?"

"Yes, truly."

"I am disappointed—I am concerned—"

"Dearest Kythe—truest, best sister—I am not; there is a break in my sky of darkest

night. I am not yet blest, but the delay is caused by a motive so expressive of her womanly nature, I can but love her the more. I am not to owe to any one but herself the restoration to my place in her affections; and, Kythe, is not this so truly like our sensitive, shy, but most loving Marion—we have too many eyes upon us at present—a reconciliation would form a public family act, unfitting the solemn binding together once more of two souls who were nearly separated by worse than death—by Wrong and Ruth—those fiends that pile up mountains of secret misgivings, with broad rivers of the thickened waters of ever-stirring recriminations, that flow the faster, as you think, to land. Oh! Father beneficent, of all the blessings Thou hast so bountifully showered on me, for none do I thank Thee more than for this escape from a most just punishment. No receding shore is mine—fleeting—failing. I inhale the breath of coming happiness. Excuse me, sister; but think of me. In some moment of time—some

solemn, quiet hour when nature is at rest, the birds at roost, the flowers folded up in deep repose, the moon most shy of silvery light, not a leaf moving, not a stir of air, no eye near, in a dim, soft, dewy night, I shall hear the words whispered in my ear, 'Godfrey, I love you.' Think of the bliss of existence expecting them!"

"Dearest Godfrey, you restore me to comfort again. She passed me so rapidly—coloured, as I thought, with anger."

"Ah, Kythe, it was a blush; when I was endeavouring to see it, she escaped my clasp—a blush that gives me this pulse of ecstasy. She has a heart for me still; and that she knew it so, sent this innocent shame straight from it."

"How well you understand her, brother. For my part, I was unhappy; I thought my Marion was gone—that gentle Marion who calmed to sanity a shattered brain."

"She can do all things by the mere might of that gentleness. And now, Kythe, in this one thing you can assist me. You are aware

that we are becoming popular. Invitations pour in upon us. That kind old Duchess will take no denial. In accordance with the desire of repairing many a former mistake, I am anxious to respond to these various proffers of hospitality and friendship. Hitherto I have warded them off by saying I did not wish at present to tear my wife from her children. But now that their regular instructors are coming, and that she will not be so tied down to them, will you bid her think of the eldest child among them, grey-headed, but still not the less eager to learn? Ask her if I am to go alone into the society where I am to learn these new duties; or that, trusting to that feeling which will keep me chained down in coldest decorum, rather than lose this pleasure, she will accompany me? Tell her that, when alone with her, I will ever remember to help the mother of my children to respect herself."

"If she judges of you by her usual standard, even as she would herself be judged, I feel sure she will consent."

"Surely this is my sister approaching—she appears disturbed."

Mrs. Trevor, keenly disappointed at the failure of her grand plot—still more so at the open slight, or rather censure, passed upon her brother—was inclined to be universally chagrined with every one, and came to Lady Gordon for comfort.

"Sister," said Godfrey, kindly, "are you not invited, as well as ourselves, to dine at G—— Abbey?"

"We are so; and of course I have no mind to go, exposing family feuds in the glaring way Mrs. Asheton likes to do."

"But if she accepts, will you? The reply ought to go."

"I have no objection, provided you undertake that there is no family scene."

CHAPTER XXVI.

BADLY AS MR. ASHETON HAS CONDUCTED HIMSELF THROUGHOUT THIS HISTORY, HE OUTDOES HIMSELF IN THIS CHAPTER.

It was the night of the G—— Abbey dinner-party. Marion had given a reluctant consent, which she sorely repented as the time drew near. Godfrey endeavoured to be as stony as the Mr. Asheton of old, until he discovered that her reluctance arose more from leaving her children (a first, though short, separation) than from fear of him. They, however, were much above regretting it themselves; Aunt Kythe had a tea-party on the sands; and delightful as it would have been to have

mamma there to help on the fun, still she could not have done so in that beautiful dress which made her look so pretty, they would not have missed the sight for anything.

They were to go four in the coach, so Marion was pretty safe, even had Godfrey been inclined to be too polite. Mrs. Trevor entered first; Marion, following, seated herself opposite to her. Mr. Trevor, with that blundering stupidity which always caused him to do the wrong thing, from the time he awoke until the time he was safely asleep again, was about seating himself on the same side as Marion. Perhaps it was the quick peremptoriness with which Mr. Asheton ordered him to sit by his wife that coloured Marion's cheeks so vividly. Certainly Mr. Trevor was himself so bewildered that he never recovered the shock the whole drive. And as Mrs. Trevor kept up a running commentary to him the whole way, of how absurd he was not to know the right seat which custom, laws, and rules ordained should

be his when the unusual number of four people had to go in the coach, Godfrey had ample time to enjoy the rare pleasure of being seated close to his wife, almost inhaling her breath.

He thought he would be careful not to encroach; yet it was irresistible trying to seek her hand, which, when found, proved a sort of timid, shy hand, ready to fly at the first touch. So, as if his was a dead, inanimate, lifeless thing, he let it lie quiescent on hers, until its timidity gave place to security. Hapless little hand! At its highest moment of blind confidence, it was made so fast a prisoner, it could not release itself without making more stir than the imprisonment was worth. So it remained passive, submissive. Fortunately, ere greater liberties were taken with it, the time came for drawing on of gloves, and with a sudden, unexpected resistance, it was free. But the pleasure of that drive, the certainty that it must occur again soon, within an hour or so,

imparted a very becoming happiness to Mr. Asheton's face.

The amiable Duchess greeted them both with much satisfaction. If Marion did not look quite so happy as her husband, she imputed it to the fact that she might feel a little embarrassed, so long secluded from society.

Nos. 1 and 2 were not there; important members as they appear to have been in —— shire, judging by their reports being considered worth believing and retailing, they had never yet penetrated the exclusive circle of G—— Abbey, otherwise they would have found much food for comment, not to say astonishment.

How agreeable and intelligent was Mr. Asheton; how his wife never spoke, low as was her voice, that he did not hear what she said; how he appeared to dote on and admire her; how the Duke said he had never seen so lovely a face, the expression being so confiding—so innocent; and how Mr. Asheton answered, her face was her least perfection. How the Duchess petted and made much of

her; and how Mrs. Trevor was annoyed, not to say indignant, that, in order to hear Marion sing, the Duchess rose up and left Mrs. Trevor, on the very point of telling her the most interesting item in the history of the Miss Trevors; and how Marion sang very prettily, accompanying herself, which made Mrs. Trevor think to herself that all along Marion must have been a very good musician, only she had not chosen to allow it.

And the old feelings came back to her heart, of dislike and anger. Mr. Trevor, too, stumbled over a stool, and broke a priceless saucer, the cup, still full of coffee, alighting safely in the embroidered lap of a stately old countess, who, grim and sallow, looked as if she never would forgive him, and probably never did.

And how the Duchess asked, so beseechingly that Marion could not deny her, that, some time, they would all come and pass a week with her, bringing those three children who had caused such mighty doings in the family.

But they could not tell what passed in the coach going home; how Mrs. Trevor, at her old practices, irritated beyond the curb of reason, began to upbraid Marion; how Marion, unused to such late hours, laid back her fair head, and slept like a child; how Mrs. Trevor, taking advantage thereof, and determined to say something or die, brought the full force of her indignation to bear upon Godfrey; how he, unheeding her, was still more base to the unconscious Marion, cautiously, deceitfully inserting one arm round her, gradually bringing that fair head on to his shoulder; how that beautiful brow lay close to his lips; and how, by degrees, those lips came nearer and touched it, and having done so, touched again.

Mrs. Trevor, after one or two direct appeals for an answer, and receiving none, concluded that her brother, like the two others, was a prey to fatigue and sleep; yet she was startled by the flashing of the lamps revealing something like glowing eyes opposite to her; she

concluded it was the sparkle of Marion's head-dress.

As for Mr. Trevor (low be it spoken) he was not asleep, only he often found it convenient to appear so.

Godfrey was incorrigible. However, as Marion was not aware of all he did when she was asleep, it perhaps did not appear so unreasonable to her, his request to come and see his children ere he retired to rest.

But he lingered so long, and she was so tired, she began to be indignant.

"Call me Godfrey, then, and I will go at once."

"I will do no such thing; you are very unkind, keeping me waiting so long."

"It is so small a request. Will you do it?"

"No; now go, for I have rung for Stephenson."

"Then thus I revenge myself."

Snatching her in his arms, he kissed her rapidly, until, hearing Stephenson's step, he

placed her, breathless and indignant, on the sofa, and ran out. Marion was very cold to him for some days after this, but he was very penitent, and besought her forgiveness most humbly.

"I am not used," said he, half smiling, "to these strong English wines; they must have got into my head."

He delighted to see she was even more angry at the excuse than at the original crime.

"I never thought to hear an Asheton use a subterfuge," quoth she.

"Poor wretches, they are but mortal after all, Marion. It is true, however, what you think. You yourself intoxicated me."

"I think nothing about it," answered she, angrily.

He was more discreet the next time they dined out, but he allowed of no refusals. Though he knew nothing of Doctor Johnson's declaration, that driving in a chaise with a pretty woman is the extreme bliss of life,

he yet experienced an inordinate delight in so doing. Especially as once or twice they had to go alone, and, moreover, would soon do so altogether, for Mrs. Trevor was about to withdraw from them the light of her amiable presence.

She was not doing herself or them any good by remaining longer; yet she clung to the belief that she was as necesssary to her brother as ever, until even Mr. Trevor perceived they were to stop.

Prissy's marriage was imminent; Mrs. Trevor had her reasons for not wishing to be present at it. In the high state of excitement into which those Flowers were forcing themselves, in endeavouring to keep pace with their superiors, Mrs. Trevor was fearful lest they should put an indignity upon the heiresses, and ask them to be bridesmaids; which, secretly, those young ladies, unworthy of so discriminating a mother, were most anxious to be. Having tasted the excitement of being in love, though the object of their joint ad-

miration had not only disregarded the fond appeal, but had returned to Eton in the highest possible state of glee in parting from them, they were anxious to increase their experience in such delightful affairs. But their mother was as inexorable in her way as Edward in his. Not even the knowledge that the Duchess (self-invited) intended to honour the wedding with her presence moved her. Indeed, the real truth was, she had no excuse to stay. No one asked her to do so. Her brother, she could not but perceive, longed for her departure, more that he might have Marion to himself than to be rid of his sister. She was an object now of almost perfect indifference; and she had not sufficient discrimination to see that her efforts to regain her position in his estimation were endangering even that remnant of his regard.

A little more, and he might despise as much as he had reason to condemn her. She really was grieved to part with Lady Gordon, and

promised most gladly to pay her a visit in Scotland. She felt a better woman after talking to Kythe, and, unconscious of the reason, loved to be in her society. The calm and holy peace of such a character cast a radiance on those within her circle.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN WHICH, THOUGH BUT ONE WEDDING IS CELEBRATED, SOMETHING VERY LIKE TWO WAS SOLEMNISED.

It being considered orthodox to end a history by a marriage, we will not depart from the general rule.

Behold a beautiful day. Prissy had been sure that it would rain—not the usual rain, commonly designated "cats and dogs;" but a fearful, overwhelming, tempestuous rain, that might be properly styled, in aggravated distinction from the other, "bulls and bears."

During the days of courtship, Prissy's moods had been various. While Mr. Courtenay was present, so happy and contented

a Prissy never was seen. She basked in the sunshine of his broad countenance; she relied on his slightest word as upon an oracle; she would have faced any danger under his protection, without the slightest disposition to scream. She was full of vanities and peremptorinesses about her garments. *His* bride must, of course, be very particularly dressed.

But when he was absent, when he had to return to London to attend to his business, she was a totally different Prissy. She became low, desponding, hysterical.

She would not regard her fine things; no, perhaps she might never require them.

It was all very well bidding her try on her wedding-dress; *he* was not going to marry her for her dress.

It was very kind of Kythe and Marion, getting such pretty bridesmaids' dresses for their little girls; but there were only three of them, and whoever heard of an uneven number of those necessary articles.

This terrible misfortune being done away with by the duchess, who promised to bring a granddaughter, a little Lady Adela, stately as the Demoiselle Issa, and of her own age, still Prissy kept up the desponding mood.

"I think I must write and tell Mr. Courtenay that you are sorry, and do not wish to be married."

"Oh, you unkind May, did I behave like that to you, when you were in love?"

"Was she in love, Prissy?" asked Godfrey. "I think she has no heart—she never was in love."

"Oh, but she was, dreadfully; far worse than me. She said one day—now don't interrupt me, May—that women's love was a pitiable thing. Once it got into the heart, there was no getting it out; and really I think that is quite true."

"Is it true, May?" asked her husband.

"A good, noble love, such as Kythe's for her Alan, remains. It is the pulse of the

heart. But other sorts of love soon go—like that."—and she blew the seeds of a dandelion away, in an indifferent, rather saucy, manner, that made Godfrey long to punish her, beat her, kiss her. One, he rather thought, would be as disagreeable to her as the other.

"See, Prissy, here is my present to you."

"Dear, dear, a present! You know, May, I don't care for presents from you, because I love you."

"And I give them to you for that reason, also, because I love you."

"A watch! Oh, if I break it now. Mamma always said I was not fit to have a watch, I was so careless."

"But if you are fit to be Mr. Courtenay's wife, surely you are fit to be trusted with a watch?"

"Of course, dear May, no doubt about that; it is such a little beauty. How pleased he will be! You always think of such nice things, May."

"And here is my present, Prissy," said Godfrey.

"What, another? Oh! now this is too much. It's quite happiness enough, you know, that I am going to be—that is, he, I mean—May, May, how unkind you are, you know what I mean."

"Mean! You must mean something very naughty, you blush so, Prissy."

But shortly Marion's blushes outrivalled Prissy's. Godfrey's present was a bracelet; within the clasp was a miniature likeness of Marion, with little doves nestling all about her.

She ran off, not wishing to hear more of Prissy's delight, and of Godfrey's declarations that it was not sufficiently pretty.

Mr. Rupert Asheton was best-man, a proper act of friendship to dear old Courtenay. If the bride and bridegroom were not very handsome specimens of the human race, at all events they were attended to the altar by very beautiful children, and their

wedding was as pretty a sight as needs be seen.

The best-man was a little put out in the morning, because his mother would not allow him the dignity of "stick-ups." And the little bridesmaids were rather bewildered, because the bride promised them all four the distinguished situation of holding her gloves.

Marion mended that matter by distributing Prissy's property into four parts—two gloves, one handkerchief, and one bouquet, to which was further added a vinaigrette. So their little hands were well employed.

But the united efforts of everybody had not been sufficient to prevent Mrs. Flower dissolving into such floods of tears that the bridegroom declared he was so damp he feared catching the rheumatism, sitting next to her at breakfast. This remark she understood literally, so, what between her endeavours to keep dry and her anxieties about the breakfast, the jellies being perversely

placed where the pastry should have been, and various other little *contretemps*, she contrived to bear up. In fact, Mr. Courtenay was so funny and amusing, that neither Prissy nor her mother had time for much weeping, until the speeches came.

Oh, those sad speeches, which, if they begin with a melancholy turn, arrive at last at perfect misery; if complimentary, at the topmost pillar of nonsense; if merry, good luck to the wedding.

Mr. Asheton had to begin. Though about his first essay at public speaking, his heart was so warm to "dear old Courtenay," his gratitude so great to that good Prissy, he made a most eloquent, yet sincere, speech, in drinking the health of the bride and bridegroom—so touching in some of its allusions, that many more besides Mrs. Flower broke into a sudden gush of tears—so humble in the little he said of himself, that even Marion's eyes were lifted up to his in open defiance of the self-censure.

That look well rewarded him. He sought it again, and it was not withheld. And so full was he of this unexpected fortune, that, until universal laughter aroused him, he was not aware that the bridegroom was returning thanks.

A very nice, sensible speech, as full of dry humour as happiness — and remarkable at the end of it for the entire disregard Prissy paid to the name of Mrs. Courtenay, even looking round in evident amazement at so stupid a person not answering when she was so often invoked. Mr. Courtenay brought her to a proper sense of her own forgetfulness, by apologizing for giving her a name she evidently intended to disown, and begged to know if they should return to church, and get the marriage all undone again. Prissy, in half fear, now rushed into the contrary extreme, and answered for both herself and him. This, however, did not prevent him rising to propose the health of the bridesmaids, in which, departing from the

usual course in wishing them speedily in the same situation as the bride, he paid them many pretty compliments, bidding them go on in following the examples of their mothers; "For," said he, "when I and my Prissy are old, and tied by age and infirmity to the chimney nook, she reading the newspaper aloud to me, how delightful will it be to see notices of good and noble ladies doing their duties in this grand old England of ours, and foremost among them all, the names of our little bridesmaids. It will make us both young in heart again."

And thereupon, the little bridesmaids, fired by this idea, enthusiastically answered they would be sure to remember all Mr. Courtenay said, though they were hushed into immediate silence by the best man, who told them to hold their tongues; it was his business to return thanks for them. Which he did after a fashion that did not please them at all, for he said little about them, entering into some private ideas of his own, in which the bride

was threatened with his supreme displeasure if she did not make a good wife to "dear old Courtenay."

Mr. Flower gave a homily upon marriage, in which he set forth the duties of husband and wife in rather a marked way. It was attentively listened to; but as Marion never raised her eyes, her uncle could not exactly tell whether she took any part of it to heart.

Mr. Asheton's speech, on returning thanks for the health of his wife, was short; but there was dumb eloquence in his manner as he said "I thank you," and sat down, that left so solemn a silence behind it, none appeared able to break it, until he himself rose again, and proposed the health of Mrs. Flower—"Aunt Flower." (Oh, Mrs. Trevor, had you but been there, you might perhaps, in virtuous indignation, have kept your brother in some restraint; but in manly, straightforward words he eulogizes Aunt Flower, the Duchess sitting there and hearing it all.)

It was not much that he said, but apparently perfectly sincere, for there is no mistaking truth.

Once more he caught a glance—could there be love in it? Certainly there was no hate; very much the reverse. He felt, if they were alone, in the dim twilight, he might have demanded, and she would not have denied, an answer—"Wherefore this glance?" Was his probation over? Had he proved sufficiently that the Mr. Asheton who had wronged her was indeed gone for ever; that he would frighten her no more with his pride and self-love? He startled himself, as well as all around, by the sudden crashing of the glass he held between his fingers—in his absence of mind, they had quivered with the strong hope in his heart. How he longed for the wedding to be over—for a space of time to breath in and think alone. Not even the speaking intelligence of Kythe's sympathising glances could he bear. She watched Marion, even as he did himself.

But he was not to consider his own feelings;

resolutely he must drive them away, and be amiable, agreeable, self-forgetting, as long as the revelry lasted. Prissy departed with the lower part of her face all smiles, and the upper part overflowing with tears. Mrs. Flower, oblivious as to what she was doing, as she lost sight of her dear Prissy, sat down, overpowered on a jelly left in an inconvenient place by a careless servant.

All was over—carriages were ordered—people began to leave.

"I shall walk home," said Godfrey to Marion, "after I have seen Kythe safe to her house, therefore do not keep the children waiting for me."

So, congratulating each other on the successful termination of the day, "good-nights" were said, and poor Mrs. Flower was allowed to go off to bed, and weep as much as she pleased.

"Now, children, jump in," said May to her little ones. "I think I shall run down to Aunt Kythe's, to see that she is not too tired."

"Mother," whispered Rupert, "now be a

kind mother, and walk home with my father."

"He is at home, long ago, you naughty best-man."

"Oh, is he?" responded the best-man, mockingly; but he jumped into the carriage with much alacrity.

At last Godfrey was free. He might wander now until day-dawn up and down those woods, thinking over those half bashful, yet ingenuous, glances, and conjecturing if he might demand wherefore they were bestowed on him.

"My May is so strangely resolute," said the more gentle Kythe to him, ere they parted, as if in extenuation of her hardness.

He made no answer.

"It would make me so happy to see you once more united, brother, ere I leave for Scotland."

"I cannot bid you wait, Kythe. I would not dare say when I may hope, blest as I am with the remembrance of her looks to-day. But when do you go, my chiefest and best comforter?"

"Very soon now. I only waited over Prissy's wedding, because, unheeding my deep mourning, the good, kind girl would take no denial. She brought me to May, she said, and it was the only favour I could do her in return, to be present at her marriage."

"Kythe, I shall come and see you in Scotland. I wish to consult you about a house I intend to build; wherein you may place your present landlady, as you like her so much, on the one condition that she lets her house to no one but you."

"An easy condition to fulfil; but where will you place it?"

"On a spot consecrated to me by more than one remembrance. I will make my Marion love that spot, in defiance of her obduracy. She shall visit it daily, hourly, as the abode of her sister — that sister left as a fond and sacred legacy to her care and love. And the very identical spot, the tree against which she leant, that shall be left untouched, in the centre of the garden. She shall not be able

to see her Kythe, without passing under its shade. She can never visit her but remembrance shall be deeply stirred, with words, and vows, and sorrows all centred within it."

"Ah, Godfrey, I shall like my intended southern home the better if you build it together in united love. A blessing will be upon this new home if hallowed with renewed vows, if consecrated by happy reconciliation. Let me wish you this, my brother."

"I accept the wish, Kythe; coming from you, it gives me faith and hope. Goodnight."

And then he wandered forth — at first not sad. Kythe's words had soothed him.

Anon, another mood assailed him, an impatient, restless longing, Should he go home at once, and demand as but justice some little kind and gentle token, some tangible proof that these soft glances were realities, not illusive—a misconception?

But she might resent his claim, and command immunity from the very bounty of those looks, as more than she had ever yet conferred.

Impatiently he wandered through the trees, unheeding the sweet beauty of the night, lighted by a young moon, that, looking down upon the sea, was reflected back in two-fold radiance. Soft was the light, yet clear.

He could see, if he so desired, the very spot for Kythe's house, and how it could be placed so as to leave that tree untouched. He wandered there.

He paced it to and fro, he pictured it all to his mental vision, and unconsciously he passed from the contemplation of this design to the memories of past times.

He leant against the tree, brooding. The hope that Kythe had imparted to him began to fade. He murmured to himself aloud, as if in the voiceless air some winged spirit would answer and comfort him.

"Shall I trust her and ask? She is more generous-natured than most women, and could not trifle with me, even if she wished it. It was certainly one of her old, well-remembered fond glances. She must know I could not receive one from her unmoved. Oh, Marion —my Marion! shall I invoke you in the name of my father? By the love and tender duty you paid my mother? Can you thus doom the son they doted on, idolised, spoiled, to this living death? Can you not forgive me, love me, for their sakes?—for indeed, indeed, I am at the extreme verge of endurance."

As he stretched forth his arm, appealing, it seemed, to heaven in corroboration of his words, he felt a slight touch on the arm yet folded against his heart. Looking down, the gleam of the reflecting ocean revealed two little white hands laid upon it, as long ago they lay, like flakes of snow. A form still somewhat in the shadow of the tree, was yet visible in likeness to one never forgotten;

and a voice, soft yet clear, beseeching, as long ago it besought help for "her cousin," preferred again a petition—

"May I walk home with you, Godfrey?"

THE END.

R. BORN, PRINTER, GLOUCESTER STREET, REGENT'S PARK.

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